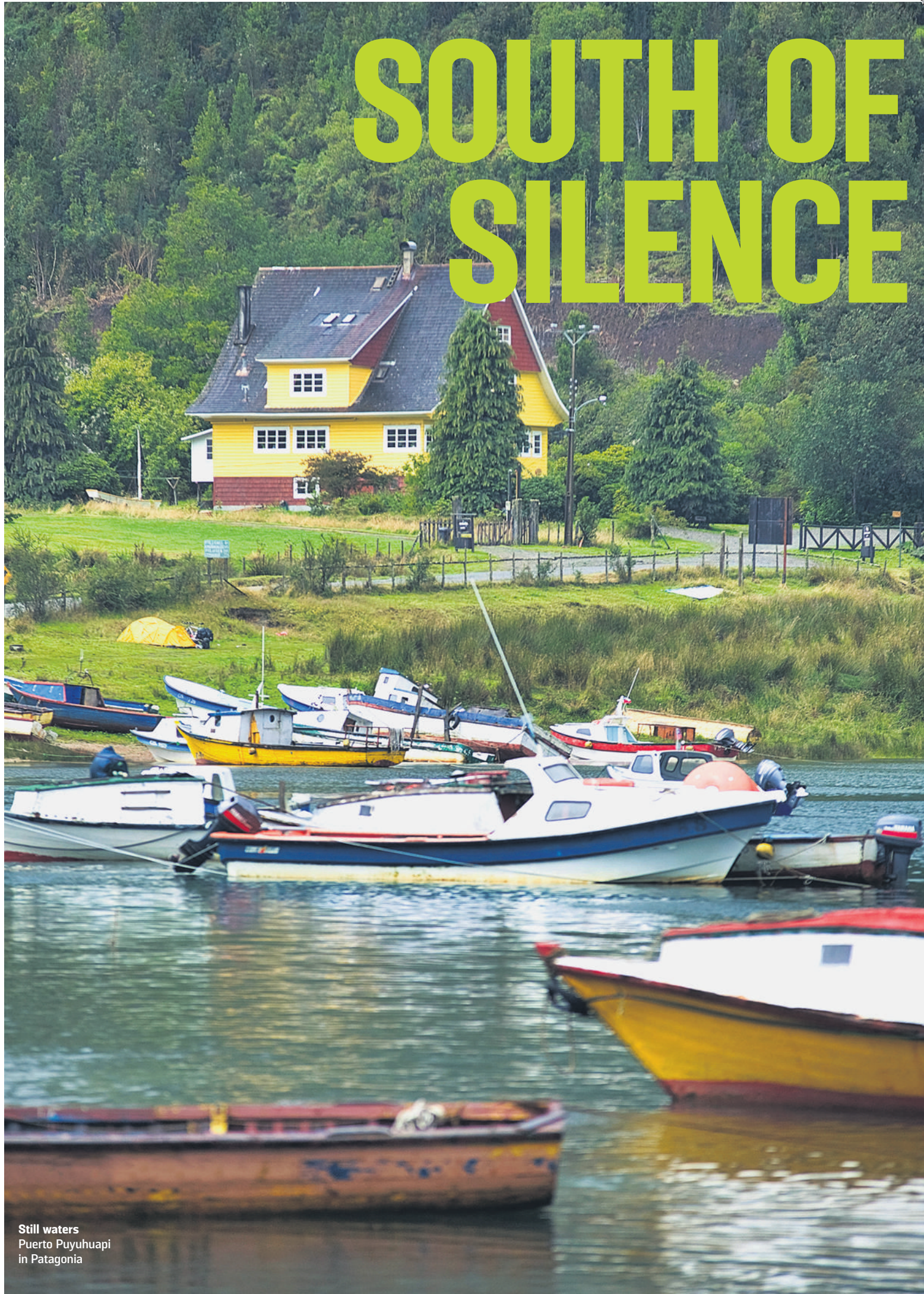


# TRAVEL

Alamy, Yvonne Gordon



Still waters  
Puerto Puyuhuapi  
in Patagonia

## SOUTH OF SILENCE



YVONNE  
GORDON



A journey in Patagonia, Chile, one of the quietest destinations in the world...

**A** long wooden footbridge was suspended across the river before us, a sign reading: “maximum capacity, four persons”. It would lead us to a scenic three-kilometre hike to the Hanging Glacier. But first we had to cross the river, milky jade-coloured meltwater from the snow-topped Andes rushing over rocks and racing downstream in rapids. Our pulses were also racing with every shaky movement of the bridge.

We were exploring Queulat National Park on the western slopes of the Patagonian Andes in Chile’s Aysén region. Local folklore has it that “Aysén” is a Hispanicised version of “ice end”, a name coined by 19th century explorers.

Some 1,220 km south of Santiago, in the Chilean part of Patagonia — the vast region at the foot of South America which is shared with Argentina and divided by the Andes — the park is a little-known gem. It only opened in 1983 with the construction of the 1,200km-long Carretera Austral

highway, so its 1,540 square kilometres of mountains, forests, rivers and glaciers are still pristine.

The journey started with a flight to Balmaceda airport, about three





→ quarters of the way down Chile's 4,300km-long stretch, and then a five-hour drive north on the Carretera Austral. It was exactly how I imagined Patagonia: a wide open landscape with cattle grazing on grasslands under a perfect blue sky, with a backdrop of the snow-covered Andes.

Every so often we would pass a small wooden cabin with a spiral of smoke coming from a chimney, but these faded away as we drove north. The last hour of the drive, we were bumping along unpaved roads through the national park in our small van. Our guide Rodrigo told us that early explorers once thought there were monsters here at the bottom of the world — "Patagons" were variously a race of giants or mythical dog-headed creatures, hence the region's name. It was getting dark, so I hoped that we wouldn't come across any.

It was in darkness we set off in a tiny boat across the fjord to Puyuhuapi Lodge and Spa, our home for the next few nights. There was a full ceiling of stars across the clear night sky as we crossed the calm waters and docked at the small jetty. The waterside lodge, which can only be reached by boat, is popular for its volcanic hot springs, which we hoped would ease away our post-hiking aches over the coming days.

The next morning I opened the curtains to see a light mist rising from the fjord and behind it, the snow-topped Andes, silhouetted by the orange glow of the rising sun — and all reflected in the perfectly still water. Behind the lodge on the other side was dense forest and nalca plants, a giant species of rhubarb; the only sound was of running water in the distance — the hot volcanic waters making their way down the hill to the springs. It was so peaceful, I immediately understood why Puyuhuapi is known as "south of silence".

Rodrigo took us on the Chucao trail through the forest, listening out for the distinctive call of the chucao bird and pointing out canelo trees, which can live for 600 years and have long been important to the indigenous Araucano or Mapuche people. "When a Mapuche dies, they can live again in the tree, especially in the silver part of the leaf," said Rodrigo, as I examined a few for any signs of life. Perhaps I needed something to help.

"This tree is called *sauco del diablo*, the Aracuanos used to eat the seed. It was hallucinogenic and was used in rituals, especially by the *machi* (elder)," said Rodrigo, hurrying us along before we decided to put it to the test.

Later, we took the boat back across the fjord to the road and after 20 minutes' drive north, came to the tiny village of Puyuhuapi to visit historian and author Luisa Ludwig. Ludwig's father Karl was one of the three founders of the town in 1935, when he and his fellow Germans were looking for a place to escape from the woes in Europe. Patagonia was so sparsely populated at the start of the 20th century that the government gave away land free to people to entice them to live here. It's still sparse: Aysén is Chile's least populated region, with fewer than one person per square kilometre.

Puyuhuapi now has a population of



**Simple pleasures**  
Puyuhuapi Lodge, above; below, the view from the bridge on the Hanging Glacier hike in Queulat National Park



about 500. Although she misses the buzz and culture of a city, Ludwig says she loves living here. "I don't have restaurants, bars or theatre; I miss that. But I have other things here — peace, tranquillity and security. There's only one road north and one road south." She points out three volcano "pimples" on the hill. Like much of Chile, the area is on an active fault line, and there is a volcano which could go off at any time. Ludwig says the area has been settled so recently — the town was only officially recognised by the Chilean state in 1971 — that it has not suffered a major catastrophe, yet.

We set off from the town to the national park and, after crossing the wobbly bridge, hiked the 3.3km trail, mostly vertical, for an hour and a half,

**I have other things here — peace, tranquillity and security. There's only one road north and one road south**

climbing uphill over tree branches and following the mud path through the trees, while hearing the chucao calls echo through the forest. Finally, we reached the Hanging Glacier — *Ventisquero Colgante* in Spanish — a spectacular chunk of blue-white ice hanging over a valley with two large waterfalls underneath. Suddenly, one of the waterfall streams split into two as the glacier calved a huge chunk of ice which fell into the valley below, the sound reaching us as a rumble of thunder.

That night we soaked under the stars in an outdoor thermal pool set on the fjord's edge, a group of seven adventurers from America, Croatia, Brazil, Ireland and Chile, swapping travel tales.

The following day we hiked through the aptly named Enchanted Forest: twisted trees covered in moss, ferns and vines, gave the trail a supernatural feel.

After a couple of hours climbing over trunks, passing small clearings, and clambering across wooden bridges over clear glacial water, the trees came to an end and we reached snow on the higher ground. Rodrigo pointed out a large cat footprint in the snow.

Finally, we reached Los Gnomos Lagoon — the Lagoon of the Gnomes — a glacier bowl with a huge pool of ice at the bottom and the very edges of a glacier visible on the rocks above. We sat on a rock with our picnic lunches and took in the scene, listening to the sound from the immense waterfalls.

Fellow guest Manuel, an elderly

Chilean farmer and conservationist, put the area's appeal into perspective. "This is the New World," he said. "I go to the Old World once or twice a year — South Africa, Paris or London — for culture. If you want nature, you go to Chile."

The mainly gravel road through the park is still being paved and the relatively new Carretera Austral highway is opening doors to uncharted parts of Patagonia. New places are being explored and there are plans to open more national parks. The Chilean government will invest \$100m (€89m) in tourism in Chile this year, creating new trails, cycle ways, protected marine areas and camping zones. Last year, tourism was up 20%.

With its pure air and water, northern Patagonia is one of the most incredible and unspoiled natural landscapes I have ever been in. As the roads are finished and word gets out, it will inevitably encourage more visitors. But maybe, to keep it unspoiled, it could be like the bridge says: just four people at a time.

## The brief

A night at Puyuhuapi Lodge and Spa ([puyuhuapilodge.com](http://puyuhuapilodge.com)) costs from €118 to €145 per person sharing and includes breakfast, hot springs, boat shuttle and parking. Guided hikes to the Enchanted Forest or Hanging Glacier cost €53, a guided hike on the Chucao trail is €13 and kayak rental from the lodge is €8 per hour. Chile's main international airport is Santiago. There are no direct flights from Ireland, but various airlines fly from Dublin to Santiago via either London, Madrid, Paris, Amsterdam or America. From Santiago there are daily flights to Balmaceda airport. [chile.travel](http://chile.travel)

