

Travel

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COVER STORY

CHILE

WIDE-OPEN PATAGONIA

NEW ROADS TO NATURE IN A PRISTINE NATIONAL PARK THAT OPENED IN 1983

By Yvonne Gordon

Before me, a wobbly wooden foot-bridge stretched across the valley. On the other side was a trail that wound through the forest to a remote mass of ice called El Ventisquero Colgante. The Hanging Glacier.

Far below me, a milky-jade-colored river rushed over the rocks, meltwater from the snow-topped Andes racing through rapids, eventually to the Pacific. Immediately in front of me, a sign.

“Maximum capacity, four persons.”
The toll for seeing the ancient blue ice, apparently, is a little sweet.

Our group was exploring Queulat National Park, on the western slopes of the Andes in the Aysen (or Aisen) region of Chile.

While Patagonia, the vast region that makes up most of South America’s tail and is shared by Chile and Argentina, has become increasingly traveled and celebrated, this area is one of its lesser-known corners. Queulat National Park opened in 1983 — after the Carretera Austral highway finally reached here that year — so the park’s 600 square miles of mountains, forests, rivers and glaciers are still pristine.

The journey started with a flight to Balmaceda airport, two hours south of Santiago and about three-quarters of the way down Chile’s long stretch of 2,700 miles, and then it was a five-hour drive north on the Carretera Austral.

The journey on the Carretera Austral offered a dramatic introduction. 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’d 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.

Rodrigo Hernández, the group’s guide, explained how early explorers once thought that there were monsters — Patagons — here at the bottom of the world, hence the name Patagonia. It was getting dark, so I was hoping we wouldn’t come across any.

It was in darkness that we set off in a tiny boat across the fjord to Puyuhuapi Lodge, our base for a few days of exploring the park and the region. 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 lodge, which can only be reached by boat, is popular for its volcanic hot springs — which we hoped would ease our post-hiking aches during the coming days.

In the morning, I opened the curtains to see the completely still fjord with a light mist rising from it, and the snow-topped Andes silhouetted by the orange glow of the rising sun, perfectly mirrored in the water. Behind the lodge was dense forest and enormous *nalca* plants (Chilean giant rhubarb); the only sound was of rumbling water in the distance — the hot volcanic waters making their way down the hill to the springs. It was easy to understand why they say Puyuhuapi Fjord is “south of silence.”

Rodrigo led us on the Chucao walking trail through the forest, listening for the distinctive call of the *chucao* bird and pointing out flora such as the *canelo* tree, which can live for 600 years and was important to the indigenous Araucano and 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 quietly examined a few silver leaves for any signs of life. Perhaps I needed something to help. “This tree is called *saucó del diablo* — the Araucanos used to eat the seed. It was hallucinogenic and was used in rituals, especially by the *machi* (the elder),” said Rodrigo, hurrying us along before we decided to put it to the test.

Back across the fjord, we drove north for 20 minutes to the tiny village of Puy-

uhuapi to visit historian and author Luisa Ludwig, who lives in a large yellow wooden house that is also a guesthouse, Casa Ludwig. Luisa’s German father, Karl, was one of the three original founders of the town in 1935, when the Germans came here looking for a place to settle to escape the economic woes in Europe.

At the start of the 20th century, the Patagonia area was so sparsely populated, the government offered free land to lure people to live here. It’s still a bit sparse — Aysen is Chile’s least-populated region, with a density less than one person for every square kilometer.

On the shores of the Seno Ventisquero fjord, Puyuhuapi now has a population of 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 theater. I love that culture and I miss that, but I have other things here — peace, tranquility and security,” she says. “There’s only one road north and one road south.”

Although her home overlooks the fjord, looking out the side window of the house, she points out three volcanic “pimples” on the hill. Like much of Chile, the area is on an active fault line, and there’s a volcano nearby, which could go off at any time. The town was officially recognized by the Chilean state only in 1971, she said, and it hasn’t suffered a major catastrophe, yet.

The roads in the park we’d been driving on were still being paved — similar to portions of Carretera Austral. As more areas of the region become accessible, apparently, there are plans to open more national parks. The park’s strength, however, is how quickly we were able to leave paved roads behind.

One day we hiked through the Enchanted Forest in the national park, through unusually twisted branches and tree trunks encased in green moss, ferns and vines, making the scenery seem supernatural.

After a couple of hours of climbing over trunks, passing small clearings and crossing wooden bridges, the trees came to an end and we reached snow on the higher ground. Rodrigo pointed out a large cat footprint in the snow. Near Los Gnomos Lagoon (Lagoon of the Gnomes), a glacier bowl with a huge lagoon of ice at the bottom, we sat on a rock with our picnic lunches and took in the scene, listening to the sound from the immense waterfalls.

On another trek, after crossing the wobbly bridge in Queulat National Park — being careful not to test the “maximum capacity” — we followed the 2-mile, mostly vertical trail, climbing uphill over branches and following the mud path through the trees. *Chucao* calls echoed through the forest.

Finally, we reached a view of the Hanging Glacier, a spectacular mass of blue-white ice that, like other hanging glaciers, terminates at the top of a sheer cliff. Waterfalls pour from each side to the valley and lake below.

Suddenly one of the waterfall streams split into two as the glacier calved a car-size ice block, which plunged into the valley, followed by a thundering rumble as the crash of the impact reached us.

The moment was one our group had pretty much to ourselves. We came across very few other hikers — the entire park only gets around 13,000 a visitors a year.

Back at the lodge, an elderly Chilean guest named Manuel, a farmer and guanaco conservationist, put the comparatively young region — and the road that leads here — 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.”

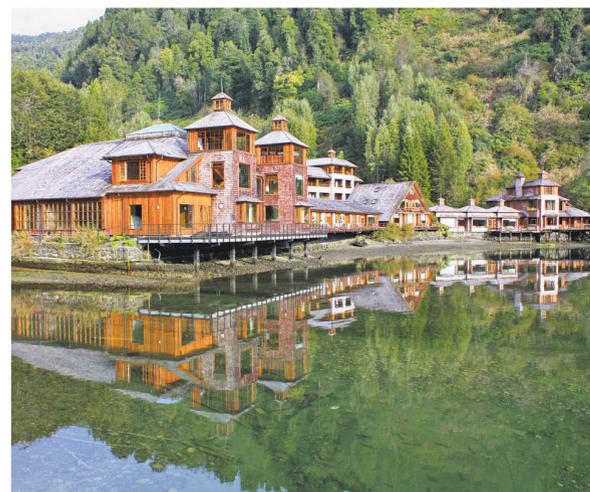
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Pablo Ocauteau / Puyuhuapi Lodge & Spa



Yvonne Gordon / Special to The Chronicle



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Augusto Dominguez / Puyuhuapi Lodge & Spa



Source: ESRI

John Blanchard / The Chronicle

Clockwise from top:

Hikers follow a trail through the Puyuhuapi rain forest in the Aysen region of Chile.

The Puyuhuapi Lodge & Spa, which can only be reached by boat.

Dense forest along a trail in Queulat National Park. The bridge at the start of the Hanging Glacier.

IF YOU GO

GETTING THERE

From Chile’s main international airport, Santiago, there are daily flights to Balmaceda airport (three hours). From there, Puyuhuapi Lodge & Spa is 175 miles, a five-hour drive, then the boat crossing to the lodge.

WHERE TO STAY

Puyuhuapi Lodge & Spa: Bahia Dorita s/n, Puyuhuapi; +56 67 2450305; www.puyuhuapilodge.com. A night at Puyuhuapi Lodge and Spa costs \$130 to \$160 per person (sharing) and includes breakfast, hot springs, boat shuttle and parking.

WHAT TO DO

Guided hikes to the Enchanted Forest or Hanging Glacier cost \$58; a guided hike on the Chucao trail walk is \$15; and kayak rental from the lodge is \$9 per hour.

MORE INFORMATION

Chile Travel: www.chile.travel/en

Aysen-Patagonia: www.recorreaaysen.cl