

# SOUTHERN COMFORT

Torres del Paine's luxurious eco-lodges offer the perfect base for exploring Chilean Patagonia

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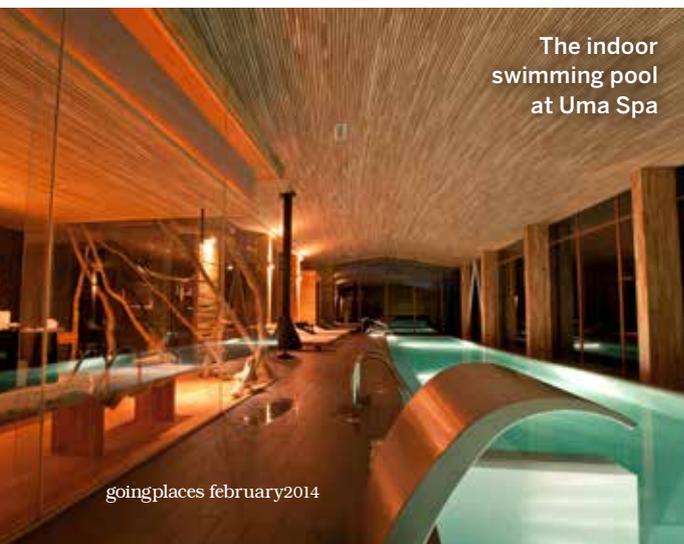
The Torres del Paine National Park is home to many prey species including guanacos



The jagged, snow-capped peaks of Torres del Paine



A field of wildflowers



The indoor swimming pool at Uma Spa

**A** fractured land of glacier, lake, forest and windswept tundra, the southern end of Chilean Patagonia really is the end of the world. It is here that you find the Torres del Paine National Park, Latin America's finest wilderness, dominated by the soaring, jagged peaks of the Cordillera del Paine. This may be a park that draws people from around the globe, but it remains an elemental preserve where puma, condor, rhea, flamingo and guanaco all roam free.

The awe-inspiring centrepiece of the park, the Torres del Paine (Towers of Paine), comprises three massive granite pillars that soar 2,800 metres above the surrounding Patagonian steppe. Nearly 2,000 kilometres south of the Chilean capital Santiago, these breathtaking spires are flanked by the summit of Paine Grande (3,050 meters) and the sharp black tusks of Los Cuernos (The Horns). High precipitation and cold air combine to create serpentine glaciers that spill down almost every flank, calving into the

turquoise lakes and rivers below.

It's one thing to read that the Torres del Paine are 12 million years old, shaped by the intrusion of granite between layers of sedimentary rock and the persistent erosion of wind and glacier, it's a completely different thing to be there, walking beneath the towers themselves or Los Cuernos, the most emblematic peaks of the reserve, or beside one of the glacial tongues that scour the weathered sides of this remote massif. To walk here is to enter a splendidly isolated no-man's land.

For those who appreciate a little luxury mixed in with their adventurous pursuits, a select group of upmarket eco-lodges bring visitors closer than ever to Torres del Paine's natural wonders. Some of the best-known hotels in Chile are now located inside or next to the park, such as the Hotel Salto Chico, perched below Los Cuernos, or Patagonia Camp, with its incredible vistas of Lago Toro.

The pick of the park's accommodation is undoubtedly the newly-opened Tierra Patagonia

(tierrapatagonia.com). Situated beside Lake Sarmiento, with panoramic views of the Torres del Paine, the exterior of this low-slung, aerodynamic hotel is deceptively modest. Banked with earth and clad in beech wood, the curvaceous building winds for 200 metres along the base of a bluff, its ground-hugging shape offering minimal resistance to the gales that frequently whip in from Patagonia's Southern Ice Field.

Designed by Santiago-based architects Cazu Zegers, Roberto Benavente and Rodrigo Ferre, Tierra Patagonia's shape is said to have been inspired by fossils found nearby. While it may be low-key on the outside, the hotel's interior is a marvel of organic design. Constructed almost entirely from wood, the main salon seamlessly unites a lounge area and circular fireplace with a bar and dining space.

Tierra Patagonia's 40 guestrooms display the same Scandinavian aesthetic, with handcrafted furniture that imparts a natural elegance. Its Uma Spa features an indoor swimming pool with jets and cascades, an outdoor Jacuzzi, a sauna, and a steam bath.

"The design of Tierra Patagonia complements and showcases the park's natural features," says Jaime Petit-Breuilh, director of Santiago-based Chile Tours. "I see the hotel's various creature comforts as a 'second skin', protecting guests from Patagonia's harsh elements, but without limiting their interaction with Torres del Paine's renowned beauty."

As an eco-lodge, Tierra Patagonia's green credentials are fully in order. All exterior materials were sourced from the area, including the stone that anchors the base of the hotel. The hotel is also part of a government initiative to re-invigorate the beauty of the area, and has teamed up with Chilean NGO Reforestemos Patagonia to plant a tree on behalf of every guest.

It's 6.20 am and most of the guests at Tierra Patagonia are still

firmly tucked up in bed. As the sun nudges above the horizon a small group of early risers cradle their cameras and attempt to shelter from the biting wind. This is the golden moment that every landscape photographer dreams of, when the Torres del Paine's three majestic towers are briefly bathed in the fiery glow of dawn. It may last a few minutes, but memories of this natural spectacle last a lifetime.

With the three towers emerging from the shadows, the details of their craggy faces picked out in crimson hues, a trio of condors soars overhead, their wings fully outstretched in an effort to catch the first weak thermals of the day. For hotel guide and conservationist Jorge Mendez, these are magical moments he never tires of.

"I recommend to all guests that they try to view the sunrise here at least once," says Mendez. "I've seen many and each one is different and equally moving. In today's smaller world, where one friend visits Bolivia and one returns from Europe, these landscapes of my homeland continue to rise above expectation. For me, despite the luxury and technology, Torres del Paine has somehow retained the mystique of the frontier. It captivates me."

As any Chilean photographer will tell you, the most fascinating skies you can shoot in this narrow land of arresting panoramas are those of Torres del Paine. The shape of the clouds changes on a whim, just like the capricious weather. In a few short hours, visitors can witness sun, rain and squally snow showers. The shifting light and ever-changing meteorology

(From top)  
The Torres del Paine National Park is a hikers' paradise

The interior of Tierra Patagonia is constructed almost entirely from wood

The grey fox is one of the many wildlife found in the park



**Much of the  
Torres del  
Paine landscape  
remains pristine**



Small chunks of glacial ice melt into Lake Grey

renders every landscape unique, and almost always makes for dreamy pictures.

But the changes in the Torres del Paine scenery are not only apparent in its photographic opportunities. If hiking is your passion, then each season has its own appeal. For some, there is no better time to visit than winter, when the jagged peaks of the Cerro Paine sit capped with heavy snow fields, and the constant stream of tourists becomes a trickle. For others, spring is unparalleled, with its blooming alpine flora and new-born puma cubs frolicking on the tundra.

Since its establishment as a national park in 1959, the number of tourists visiting Torres del Paine has steadily increased. This is mainly due to its spectacular mountains – some of them, such as Paine Grande, pose a great challenge for climbers – and its network of hiking trails, which make it a leading South American adventure destination.

Torres del Paine's classic "W route", a four-day hike through the park's main landmarks, should certainly be near the top of every trekker's bucket list. But there are also short trails for those on a tight itinerary, like the 40-minute

Mirador Grey route, which brings walkers within metres of imposing icebergs. At the other end of the scale is the Circuito Grande, an eight-day trail that threads its way through most of Torres del Paine. Just like every other great physical challenge, it provides most with the experience of a lifetime.

While few of the world's wildernesses remain uncharted territory, much of the Torres del Paine and surrounding Andean landscapes remain pristine. For years, hardy international trekkers have been drawn here to explore some of nature's finest artistry. Today, while the comfort levels have risen for some, the unspoiled beauty of this stunning region remains thankfully intact. ■



A Humboldt penguin

## A little bit about Patagonian fauna

# 1

Torres del Paine National Park boasts many different ecosystems. Each contains widely different habitats, some of which sustain flora and fauna found nowhere else on earth.

# 2

Patagonia itself is home to more than 40 species of mammal. Just a few decades ago the guanaco – Patagonia's largest mammal – was endangered, but there are now more than 3,000 of these close relatives of the llama living in the park. They're a deceptively compact animal, standing around one metre tall at the shoulder, but are still easily spotted on the grassy tundra.

# 3

Torres del Paine's guanaco support a healthy population of Patagonia's top predator – the puma. This is the southernmost of all mountain lions, and one of the largest. Like most cats they're solitary and independent, but visitors have a reasonable chance of spotting one, hunting at dusk or dawn.

# 4

The thermals of Torres del Paine's peaks and cliffs are the perfect environment for the mighty Andean condor. A wingspan of more than three metres allows these majestic carrion eaters to stay aloft for hours, searching the land for their next meal.