

Willis's Walkabouts

2009 SOUTH AMERICAN SPECIAL

Southern Chile and Argentina: About 7 Weeks: 6 December 2009 - 24 January 2010

Update: 12 August 2009

There is no other tour like this on the travel market. Instead of a fixed itinerary, there is a general outline and a rough indication of how much time each section will take. If one area turns out to be especially good, we have the flexibility to spend extra time there. Transport during the trip will include aeroplanes, buses, taxis, boats and, of course, your own feet while carrying a backpack. We will do a number of walks of up to 10 days duration. People on most of the other tours being offered in South America do not use local transportation or carry a pack for more than two days, if at all. I changed some of the original dates to suit two people who couldn't get away early. I've given approximate dates. These should not change by more than a couple of days in either direction. If they are close, but don't quite suit what you can do, please contact me urgently.

Why use a Darwin-based firm for a South American tour?

On our trips you do some of the lesser known walks, walks which take you away from the crowds that walk the well known tracks each season. Every trip is a mix of walks we have done before and walks that we are doing for the first time. We offer a wilderness experience of a kind not offered by more mainstream operators.

Since our first trip in 1990 to our most recent one in 2007-08, we have run sixteen trips to South America, each one different, sometimes substantially so, to the rest.

Our knowledge of Spanish and of many of the local customs will allow us to act as interpreters so that the group can eat in the same restaurants and stay in the same hotels as the locals. These will be reasonably priced, comfortable hotels, hostels and guest houses where we can relax and have a break between walks. This allows those taking part to gain a more intimate feeling for the culture and the people than is possible on most tours. We handle the hassles leaving you free to enjoy your holiday.

This trip will be based around the one led by guide Bruce Swain beginning in November 2007 some of the places he found particularly attractive on his previous trips for Willis's Walkabouts.

Why go with someone else?

Our trips are not for everyone. They go off the beaten track. No two itineraries are the same. Every trip includes visits to places we have never been before. There are many local and international operators who can give you something more mainstream. Choose one of them if you would prefer:

- to do the "big name" walks like the Torres del Paine W circuit in the peak season or
- if you want to go with an operator who does the same thing over and over again or
- if you prefer a certain itinerary to a flexible one that can change with circumstances or
- if you don't want to walk with a guide who has not done some of the walks on the trip or
- if you don't want to explore places untouched by other tour operators.

When to go

We plan to leave in early December. This should give us better airfares and allow us to visit the far south before the tourist hordes arrive in late December and January. We can then move back north and visit mountain areas which are inaccessible earlier due to snow covered passes.

The Itinerary

The following itinerary are based on flying to South America from Australia. People from other countries can meet the group in Santiago or at any other point on the way. The dates are early enough so we can miss most of the peak season crowds. The start date can still be adjusted somewhat to suit those who book early.

The trip will be divided into four sections any of which may be done on its own. The following summary of the draft itinerary gives a general outline of the places you might visit and hints at others. **This itinerary is not final** and is subject to change depending on such things as weather, local political conditions, the interests of the group and the airfares that available at the time.

Section 1: Torres del Paine and the South (about 6-20 December)

We begin with a flight from Australia to Buenos Aires with Aerolineas Argentinas or Santiago with Lan Chile (Qantas code share). Flying with Aerolineas should give us a cheap flight in Argentina. Flying with Lan Chile should give us a relatively cheap flight in Chile.

If we fly to Buenos Aires, we will take the first available flight to El Calafate and then catch a bus to Puerto Natales, probably the next day. If we fly with Lan Chile, we will fly to Punta Arenas on the next available flight and then catch a bus to Puerto Natales. Supermarkets in Punta Arenas have a much better selection than those in Puerto Natales so if the guide goes this route, he or she will spend a day in Punta Arenas doing some shopping.

Punta Arenas is situated on the Strait of Magellan and was once one of the richest cities in the country. There are some interesting historical sites as well as things like penguin colonies. Plenty for you to do while the guide organises food.

In Puerto Natales, we finish our preparations for our walks in Torres del Paine, the number one trekking destination in South America. This park has been described as "a 'must' for its wildlife and spectacular scenery." The main long circuit walk became very popular in the late 1990s. The opening of the "W" route has removed some of the pressure. Get a bit off the beaten track and it gets even quieter.

Exactly what we do will depend on what is open when we arrive. Our 2005 group had planned to do the full circuit walk but it was closed due to snow in the pass. This can happen at any time of year. We have been to the park many times and know some of the best of the lesser known walks as well as the better known ones. As always, **the weather makes some of our decisions for us.**

Note. Maybe, just maybe, with tourism down all over the world, we can book some of the refugios along the trail. If the weather is kind to us, this would be a bit of overkill. If it were to be as bad as it's been on some of our trips, you'd be very happy to be indoors at night.

We finish Torres del Paine with a boat back to Puerto Natales. This has been operating for a few years now. Our last three groups did this and all agreed that it made a perfect end to that part of the trip.

From Puerto Natales, we catch a bus across the border to El Calafate. No matter how often we visit, we can't resist yet another day trip to the Perito Moreno Glacier. In 2003, for the first time since 1988, it blocked the exit from one of the arms of a huge lake, damming it until it broke through with a rush. I think it's done it again since.

Its vast blue ice front, nearly a kilometre wide and fifty metres above the surface of the lake, is a staggering spectacle. Every few minutes the glacier sends a huge ice tower crashing into the lake. It's occasionally so loud that some people claim it sounds like an artillery bombardment.

Those joining or leaving the trip at the end of this section can do so in Puerto Natales or El Calafate. We can assist with the best choice closer to departure.

Section 2: The Carretera Austral (about 21 December to 3 January)

From El Calafate, we take a bus to El Chaltén. This is the gateway to Mt Fitzroy. The views can be spectacular, but the trails are among the most crowded in South America. Our group in 2005-06 discovered that an area just outside the park we used to include in our trips had been allowed to run down and no longer offered the kind of experience we wish to include. For this reason, we will spend no more than a day here before taking a minibus to the end of Lago del Desierto where, if it's running, we'll catch a boat to the far end of the lake and the police check point where we check out of Argentina and head back to Chile once again. (If the boat isn't running, the walk along the lake takes about a day. If the weather is kind, the views are spectacular both on the walk and the boat.)

We plan to hire horses to carry our gear for the next short leg to the ferry across Lake O'Higgins/San Martín. (This lake is so large that it has different names on each side of the border.) This brings us to the southern end of the Carretera Austral, the gravel road which connects the towns in this part of the country. We met our transport and begin the journey north to Coyhaique, the only large town between Puerto Montt and Puerto Natales in southern Chile. The scenery is spectacular. We plan to do a number of walks along the way, which ones we choose will depend on the weather and track conditions at the time we reach them.

From Coyhaique, we continue north at a faster pace to Puerto Montt, the major town in south central Chile. We will use a combination of bus and boat for this final leg of the section.

Note. This section depends on our being able to book transport. I can't confirm the transport (a deposit is payable) until I have confirmation that the trip will definitely run. If I can't make the booking for the appropriate date, the route will change to entirely in Argentina, travelling north on route 40. There are a number of short walks I've long wanted to do. Depending on availability, we might hire a vehicle or we might take a bus.

Section 3: Puerto Montt to Bariloche and Return (about 4-13 January)

Those joining or leaving here can do so in either Bariloche or Puerto Montt. If we have to take the Argentine route for section two, it will have to be Bariloche. This section will include walks in Nahuel Huapi in Argentina and in Vicente Perez Rosales in Chile.

Nahuel Huapi is the oldest and one of the largest parks in Argentina, full of mountain trails and spectacular scenery. There are a number of mountain huts which we may be able to use (especially useful if the weather turns bad). Based on past experience, the earlier the walk, the less likely it is that the passes will be open. We will work out a number of possible options prior to the trip, but, as always, the weather will determine which ones we can do at the time.

Section 4: The Condor Circuit (about 15-24 January)

From Puerto Montt, we take a bus north to Talca, the base for the Condor Circuit. The 2005 group was only the second time that one of our trips visited this area. It was so spectacular and untouched that all agreed it was the real highlight of the trip. It offers great trekking and less chance of bad weather than further south. The 2005 group took ten days and used a local guide to pick the best route and horses to carry most of the gear. As most of the walk is at an altitude of about 3000 m, this makes it a lot easier. Here's the description from a Chilean website, www.trekkingchile.com.

This walk is completely unlike the others. Although everyone on our first trip there and most of those on later trips loved it, some hated it. The walk goes through a high-altitude, volcanic semi-desert. Although the scenery is spectacular, it is not at all like the green areas we will have walked through on the earlier sections.

We had a great guide (who only spoke Spanish) on our walk in January 2007 and again in January 2008. We hope to get him again and to have him arrange pack horses. With some parts of the trail well over 3000 metres and one possible side trip well over 4000 metres, you will have to work hard enough without carrying a full pack.

At the end of this section, we return to Talca where we catch a bus to Santiago the following day. Those with a bit more time can spend some time sightseeing in Santiago (or Buenos Aires if they are flying with Aerolineas). The others can fly directly back to Australia.

What does it cost?

Our fee is \$2150. This covers the guide, who also acts as organiser and cook and the evening meals served on the walks. In addition, you will have to pay your share of all the expenses for food, accommodation, transport, etc. The guide will pay the same fees and fares as everyone else and will keep these as low as reasonable comfort, reliability and availability will allow. Our accommodation will cost anywhere from about US\$15 to US\$40 per night. Expect most of the places to be toward the low end of the range, but it might be nice to enjoy a bit of luxury once in a while.

Using a value of about 70 cents US for the Australian dollar, a **rough** estimate of the costs (in Australian dollars in late 2007) was. The Aussie dollar has risen, but so have prices.

Return airfare	\$3500	Other transport	1450
Walkabouts fee	2150	Travel Insurance	350
Park & camping fees	250	Public Liability Insurance	300
Other meals on walks	200	<u>Accommodation</u>	<u>700</u>
Restaurant meals	600	Total	\$9500

Public liability insurance for our overseas trips has been a problem in recent times. Our overseas trips were removed from our main policy and then insured individually. Last year, the cost for covering a single trip like this was somewhat more than \$2500. The actual cost above will depend on the final price we are quoted this year.

With luck, we'll be able to shave a bit off the total above. If the Aussie dollar drops compared to the local currencies, it will cost more. If it comes back, it will cost less. We do not expect the whole trip to cost less than \$7500 or more than \$11 000. This does not include any souvenir shopping you may do.

The Chilean peso is fairly strong at present. The total cost may be closer to our high estimate than the listed one above.

What do you get for the fee?

You get expert advice on the things to bring. You get an interpreter. You get someone who will handle the mundane details of making the travel arrangements, doing the food shopping for the walks, organising accommodation etc. You get someone who will provide all the group equipment (billies, stoves, etc) and who will cook all the evening meals on the walks allowing you to relax and enjoy yourself. You also get a small, like-minded group of people with whom you can share your experiences and expenses. Hiring a vehicle as part of a group costs far less than hiring it with only two or three.

Note 1. Some of what you get for your money is not very visible. For example, prior to one of the long walks, you might spend a day relaxing or sightseeing while the guide goes out and hits the supermarkets, then spends an hour (or two or three) doing the final organising for the meals on the walk. Or perhaps, the guide (or interpreter) might have to take time out to assist someone with something like making a phone call or sending a fax while you are free to do whatever appeals. If you can't see the value in services like these, you are unlikely to feel that you are getting real value for your fee.

Note 2. Prices are subject to change.

Note 3. Pack horses. We plan to use pack horses in two places on the trip. These are for carrying gear only. Our liability insurance will not cover horse riding.

Note 4. Travel Insurance. Everyone who participates in this trip must have travel insurance which covers them for trekking.

Note 5. A large majority of those who have taken part in our South American tours are Australian so all prices are quoted in Australian dollars. We have had several people from other countries take part by making their own travel arrangements to and from the start and finish points.

Note 6. All bushwalks are subject to change due to weather conditions. If we get really foul weather at the start of a walk, we may wish to abort it, at least temporarily. If we get really foul weather later on, we may have to cut a route short. If we get really foul weather late in a walk, we could miss a connection.

On a walk in Torres del Paine in late 2001, bad weather one day kept us from moving to a base camp from which we had hoped to be able to reach the southern ice cap. (We almost got there on a day walk the following day.) This left us with an extra day which some felt was wasted on a less spectacular day walk. In 2004 and 2006, poor weather prevented us from doing one of the walks we had planned. **Whatever we plan, the weather has the final say.**

Note 7. Torres del Paine. Torres del Paine is the most popular trekking park in South America. When poor weather forced us to move from one campsite to another, more popular one, we counted **102 tents** at that site. In addition, there were at least another 100 people in the huge refugio there. **If you would be happy doing the popular W walk with all its crowds, you would be better off doing Torres del Paine on your own.** If you would rather get off the beaten track and take your chances with the weather for a major part of your visit to the park, we know of no one else offering trips like ours.

What you don't get?

You do not get a guide who will hold your hand and make every decision for you. **You** must be prepared to take on a much greater degree of responsibility than on most other tours. All members of the group, including the guide, are expected to work together in establishing how the group will function, who will lead on the walks, who will look after the stragglers, etc.

A trip such as this cannot work unless everyone helps out. A few examples may help you understand just how important this is.

Hypothermia is another potential problem. A person who becomes hypothermic is unlikely to realise it. In an extreme case, he or she may have to be physically restrained from doing something which a rational person would describe as insane. There is no way that any one person, no matter how experienced, can look after an entire group 100% of the time. No matter how careful the guide may be, there is always a possibility that he will be the one to get injured or otherwise incapacitated.

Accepting the responsibility that goes with a trip like this is part of the experience we offer. It is one of the things that sets our trips apart from the vast majority of "adventure" trips on the market. For those prepared to accept this responsibility, it makes the experience doubly rewarding. Those who are not prepared to accept such responsibility would be better off going on a "normal" tour.

Is it for you?

This trip is not for the average tourist. We can neither control nor predict the weather, only accept it as it comes. If you do not want to take the necessary responsibility and/or you cannot obtain the necessary equipment, it is not for you. Good physical fitness and a good mental attitude are both necessary.

Terrain and difficulty. Some of the walking will be relatively easy. Some may be quite difficult. Our walks will include everything from easy relatively flat trails to scrambling up or down steep hills covered in thick scrub with no sign of a track.

Even on some of the trails, the path can be quite broken and involve scrambling up and down over boulders and/or loose rocks of all sizes. If you have never carried a pack on an overnight walk, have never walked off trail, have never camped in cold, windy and wet conditions, it will be harder for you to cope with the likely conditions than for a person who has had the relevant experience. As an example, one of our clients who could happily cover more ground than anyone else in the group on easy terrain was the slowest on the rougher ground. Past experience has shown us that a fit, experienced 70 year old may cope better than a fitter 25 year old who does not have experience in coping with adverse conditions.

Mental attitude. If you are goal oriented rather than experience oriented, you would probably be better off going with someone else. Picture yourself in the following situations, both of which occurred on one of our recent trips.

- We planned to do a walk which would take us to a base camp from which we hoped to visit the southern ice cap. We got to a hut a day's walk from our proposed camp. The following day it was raining and foggy so we decided to remain where we were. This did not leave us enough time to continue to our proposed camp for two nights so we did a long day walk the following day. This left us with one extra day. Some were content to relax and do short walks near the hut. Some felt that this time was wasted and that we should never have planned the longer walk.
- On another walk, we had allowed for sitting out at least one day's bad weather. We never got it and finished up with a day to spare half a day's walk from town. The weather was good. Most of the group were content to relax and enjoy their surroundings. Some could not wait to get back to town.

If you would have been happy to relax and enjoy your surrounds in both cases, our trips could be just what you are looking for. If not, then you might be better off on a different type of tour.

The dates

Peak tourist season in southern Chile and Argentina runs from late December through January. Every year the popular places get more and more crowded. This is, however, the best time for some people to travel. The proposed start dates have been chosen to allow us to avoid most of the crowds while still having a good chance of getting decent weather and reasonable airfares.

Getting There

If you are coming from eastern Australia, the best bet is likely to be a return airfare with Aerolineas Argentinas to Buenos Aires or Santiago. You can choose to fly into one city and out the other for the same fare. If you are coming from elsewhere in Australia, an around the world airfare might be about the same price. This can include two flights within Chile.

When last we checked, Aerolineas Argentinas was somewhat cheaper than Lan Chile. They also offered a good deal on flights to El Calafate which was cheaper than the flight from Santiago to Punta Arenas. It might be a couple of hundred dollars cheaper to fly to Buenos Aires, then El Calafate and then bus to Torres del Paine at the start.

Puerto Montt, Punta Arenas and El Calafate are the easiest places to join or leave as they have direct flights to their respective capital cities. Puerto Natales and Talca require a bus as well as a flight but they are still relatively simple connection points. Joining or leaving the trip at other points is more difficult but we can assist if you wish to do so.

A Final Caution

Do not expect everything to run like clockwork. Such things do not happen in South America. If you want to get maximum value for your money, you can go off and go sightseeing or simply relax while the guide does the food shopping or standing in line for tickets etc. Or, if you wish, you are welcome to join him while he does these things.

There will be occasional days between sections where you will be left to your own devices while the guide slows down and relaxes a bit and catch up on the organising. Based on past experience, things will run more smoothly if the guide does this.

Conditions

1. A deposit of \$200 is payable on booking. Payment in full is due as soon as we can confirm the departure.
2. Cancellation fees are \$1000 before 1 September and the full \$2150 after that.
3. All participants are responsible for obtaining the necessary passport and visas and must have some form of travel insurance.

Russell Willis