Exploring Patagonia’s ‘Unknown’ Aysén Region, Chile

Trip# 2120   February 6 - 20, 2021

Dawn at our lakeside ranch on Lago General Carrera

Background: Many adventure travelers are aware of Patagonia’s famous Torres del Paine National Park and the route that leads through it in the shape of a “W”. *This is not that.*

Instead, we will be exploring Patagonia’s [wild Aysén region in Chile](http://example.com). This park has a unique origin. In 2015 the Tompkins family, the founders of Patagonia and North Face clothing brands, gave ~200,000 acres of land to the Chilean government. Combined with two other land preserves it has helped to create in January, 2019 [a new national park](http://example.com) spreading over 750,000
acres, greater than the size of Yellowstone National Park. While spectacular in every way, the area remains relatively unknown outside of Chile itself.

We will explore this unique region in cooperation with Chulengo Expeditions, an organization dedicated to the restoration and preservation of this exquisite area. They have developed a custom itinerary for us that allows exploration of this remote region using only daypacks.

**Expedition highlights:**

- Guided tour of Santiago and introduction to Chilean culture
- 10 days of hiking in spectacular landscapes including a four-day trek supported by horses
- One day of whitewater rafting on the Baker River
- Visit to the Capillas de Marmol, the spectacular marble caves on the shores of Lake General Carrera
- All meals, on trip transportation, etc. starting with arrival in the region’s capital, Coyhaique
- Local guides throughout who will share with us their knowledge of the region’s history, geology, flora and fauna, land conservation, etc.
- Simple accommodations, eight nights sleeping in tents under the stars

**Participant expectations:**

- Hike up to 12 miles/day and climb up to 3,500ft carrying ~15-20 lb pack [some of the brochure photos show large packs because the photos were taken on backpack expeditions - the scenery is relevant to our trip, the pack size is not]
- Contribute to the work of outdoor travel and communal living. This includes setting up and taking down tents, packing of gear, and helping to cook shared meals.
Expedition location:

Map legend: red teardrops are overnight locations, dark blue teardrop is Coyhaique, airport symbol is Balmaceda, and light blue is rafting location on the Baker River.
The expedition: day-by-day

Saturday 2/6  Depart the US

Sunday 2/7  Afternoon flight to Balmaceda, Chile (BBA), the main airport for Chile’s Aysén Region. Transfer to the region’s capital, Coyhaique. Group dinner.

Monday 2/8:  Expedition begins! We will meet the bus and head south. Our first day will take us on a spectacular day hike, one of the most iconic in the Aysén Region, to Laguna Cerro Castillo, in the newly-created Cerro Castillo National Park. We spend the night at a rustic farm in the nearby town of Puerto Ibanez, on the shores of immense glacial-blue Lago General Carrera, South America’s second largest lake.
Distance: 11 miles  elevation gain: ~3,500 ft
Accommodation: Rustic farmstay, sleeping in tents but with showers / bathrooms
Tuesday 2/9: Via a spectacular two-hour ferry, with sweeping views east to Argentina and west to the Northern Patagonian Ice Field, we cross Lago General Carrera to arrive in the small town of Chile Chico. From there, we take a 1.5-hour transfer into the Jeinimeni sector of Patagonia National Park, where we set up a frontcountry (car-accessible) camp on the shores of the deep-blue Lago Jeinimeni. From there, we day hike around the shores of the lake, and, for the adventurous, make a river crossing, to arrive at the opaque turquoise Lago Verde, before returning to our camp.

Distance: 6 - 10 miles, depending on whether the group continues to Lago Verde

Elevation gain: 400 ft

Accommodation: car-camping site with simple bathrooms and cook shelters, sleeping in tents

Wednesday 2/10: After waking up to beautiful mountain views, we drive north to the wild rock formations of Valle de la Luna, where we explore this desert’s ecosystems through a loop trail. After the hike, we drive a final 1.5 hours along the shores of the lake to a family ranch, where we’ll get oriented for the horse-supported backpacking days. That afternoon, we will talk
through systems for horsepacking and backcountry living. Those who want to swim in the clear waters of Lago General Carrera are encouraged to do so!
Distance: 4.2 miles Elevation gain: 1800 ft.
Accommodation: ranch house, staying inside with showers but minimal electricity

Thursday 2/11: After a hearty breakfast at the ranch, we’ll pack up and head into the mountains. We meet the local families who will support our trek, as well as their horses! After dividing and organizing food and gear for the horses to carry, we’ll set off on our trek. We start off winding through a traditional Patagonian campo before heading higher into the mountains. The uphill makes us grateful to the horses! Our campsite is a spectacular perch overlooking the Jeinimeni mountains, where we have the opportunity to spend time with an experienced gaucho tending sheep in the high mountains. In the evening, we’ll gather around a fire for conversation about Patagonian history and culture.
Distance: 5 miles Elevation gain: 2500 ft.
Accommodation: backcountry camping in tents

Friday 2/12: After breakfast and morning reflections, we begin our day climbing higher on a dramatic plateau, which, on a clear day, affords sweeping views down to Lago General Carrera,
across to the Northern Patagonian Ice Field. We spend most of the day hiking above treeline, through strange colored rock formations, before descending to our idyllic camp in a lush valley, surrounded by hanging glaciers. The horses meet us here to deliver our supplies, and we set up a base camp for the next two nights. In the evening, we’ll gather to learn more about the establishment of nearby Patagonia National Park.
Distance: 8 miles      Elevation gain: 1200 feet
Accommodation: backcountry camping in tents

Saturday 2/13:  We head out for day explorations of surrounding area. One option is to hike toward the toe of a nearby glacier; another is to gain a higher plateau for broad views into the park and beyond. Back at camp, we’ll share dinner and reflections on our own wilderness experiences. Distance: 5- 10 miles (depending on day hike option) Elevation gain: 800 - 3,000 feet
Accommodation: backcountry camping in tents

Sunday 2/14. Our final trekking day takes us through beautiful southern beech forest and glacial valleys as we make our way back toward Lago General Carrera. As we near our pick-up
point, we return to the land of Patagonian campos. We return to the lakeside ranch for a celebratory dinner, a big traditional asado al palo, and enjoy an indoor sleep!
Distance: 10 miles  Elevation gain: 100 feet
Accommodation: ranch house, staying inside with showers but minimal electricity

**Monday 2/15:** We transition to the center of Patagonia National Park, a newly-created park some have called the “Yellowstone of South America.” After sharing breakfast, we’ll drive 1.5 hours to the Aviles Valley Trailhead, where we set off for a dramatic nine-mile loop hike through the colorful red mountains and glacially formed plateaus that make this side valley unique. That evening, we’ll camp at the comfortable frontcountry campsite located at a historic ranch building, Casa Piedra.
Distance: 9 miles  Elevation gain: ~1500 ft.
Accommodation: car-camping site with simple bathrooms and cook shelters, sleeping in tents

**Tuesday 2/16:** We drive 30 minutes east toward Argentina, watching the landscape transition to Patagonian steppe. We’ll arrive at the Lago Chico trailhead and begin this glorious seven-mile loop hike, with sweeping views of the immense Lago Cochrane, the transnational lake that forms the park’s southern border. On clear days, we may catch a glimpse of Cerro San Lorenzo, Patagonia’s second-highest peak. Once we finish our hike, we’ll drive west through the Chacabuco Valley, the heart of Patagonia National Park, to Westwinds Campground, another one of the park’s comfortable car-accessible campgrounds.
Distance: 7 miles  Elevation gain: 800 feet
Accommodation: car-camping site with simple bathrooms and cook shelters, sleeping in tents

**Wednesday 2/17:** On our final day in Patagonia National Park, we tackle the 12-mile Lagunas Altas loop, named one of Patagonia’s five best trails, with panoramic views and varied terrain. That evening, we’ll camp back at Westwinds.
Distance: 12 (daypacks only) miles  Elevation gain: 2500 ft.
Accommodation: car-camping site with simple bathrooms and cook shelters, sleeping in tents

**Thursday 2/18:** After many days of walking, we travel to the headwaters of the mighty Baker River, Chile’s largest river by volume and the center of the country’s largest (and ultimately successful) environmental campaign against the proposed HidroAysen megadam project. The river is deep, clear blue, cutting through spectacular southern beech forest. We’ll raft a high-volume but straightforward section of Class III rapids, then float and enjoy the scenery. We’ll spend a final night in cabins along the Baker River, and enjoy a celebratory dinner together.

Accommodations: simple cabins with bathrooms and showers.

**Friday 2/19:** Road trip north! We head north up the Carretera Austral, or “Southern Highway,” often called one of the world’s great road trips. We’ll drive along the turquoise Baker River, and then near the eastern border of the Northern Patagonian Ice Field. In the afternoon we will visit the remarkable Capillas de Marmol, spectacular marble caves on the shores of Lake General Carrera.

**Saturday 2/20** We continue the journey north. We will stop at the Balmaceda airport or in Coyhaique, depending on departure plans.
Transfer time: 6 hours
Participants Profile
You should enjoy traveling with a group for extended periods of time and be comfortable traveling in areas which are unfamiliar to you. You should recognize that you may find yourself in closer quarters or be less comfortable than you are used to at home. You should make it a priority to help others on the trip and contribute to their having a great time. If you do that, we guarantee that you will have a great time!

This is a vigorous hike, suitable for those with recent hiking experience and at least intermediate to advanced hiking skills. There is a possibility of stream crossings. While the pace will be moderate, you should be able to be active up to 5-7 hours per day, with brief breaks, for 10 back-to-back days, sometimes with little shade.

Since meals and lodging are provided, we will be traveling light, with backpacks in the range of 15-20 pounds fully loaded. Typical daily treks will include five to seven hours of hike time excluding breaks, with between 6 and 12 miles and an altitude gain between 400 - 3500 feet.

Experience & Risks
We will hike between at elevations of 5,000’ and under. Weather is likely to be temperate with the possibility of some precipitation.

When you participate in this activity, you should be prepared both physically and mentally, and equipped with the appropriate gear. You should always be aware of the risks involved and conduct yourself accordingly. We are not responsible for your safety—you are.

Nonetheless, it may happen on any trip that a trip member is or becomes unable to participate in one or more of the planned activities. Leaders in their sole judgment have the right and obligation to refuse participation in any activity to any group member for reasons of group or individual safety. Illness, injury or lack of proper gear or fitness for a particular activity are examples of some conditions that might result in a participant’s being unable to perform one or more activity. Leaders may try to find a substitute activity for the trip member, but this may not always be possible.
Prior to your being accepted as a participant in this trip, you will be asked to discuss your capabilities and experience with us. Please do not be offended by our questions: we wish to make sure, for both of us, that the trip is a good fit.

The Baker River

Trip Price

Price is $4,500 per person shared occupancy for AMC members and $4,700 for non-members. Non-members can join the AMC for $50, and get the member price. Deposit of $1,500 is due with application. The price will be adjusted in accordance with the best final arrangements we can make and currency fluctuations. Any savings we achieve, as well as any cost increases, will be passed back to you. Our cost estimates are conservative, and so a refund is considerably more likely than a price increase.

The expedition includes:

- Guiding in remote, often off-trail, areas by experienced instructors
- Field instruction in outdoor skills, natural and human history of Patagonia
- All transportation to and from Coyhaique, Chile
Logistical support including resupplies
On-trip transportation
Quality backcountry food and cook gear
Accommodations, from backcountry camping to car-camping to simple lodges
One day of whitewater rafting
Emergency medical evacuation insurance

Participants are responsible for:
- Flights to and from Balmaceda, Chile.
- Personal clothes and gear including sleeping bag and tent [tent can be rented if desired]. Complete gear list to be distributed at a later date.
- Guide tips - tips are not expected and are not included in the trip price. If you feel that the guides have provided exceptional service you are welcome to tip them as you see fit.
- Accommodations before and/or after trip begins/ends.
- Any beverages during the frontcountry portions of the expedition
- Insurance for travel delay, interruption, cancellation, or for baggage loss. If the possibility of such problems concerns you, individual travel insurance is suggested. The AMC has a recommended vendor whose material will be sent to you if your application is accepted.

Expedition Logistics
Travel is by flying in and out of Balmaceda, Chile (BBA).
International flights connect through Santiago. Plan to fly out 3pm or later on the expedition’s final day.

Registration
We expect a group size of 10 people, including the one leader. This trip is likely to fill quickly. If you are interested, you should apply as soon as possible. When registration is complete, we will send all participants the names, addresses, and phone numbers of all those going on the trip.

To enter Chile you will need a valid US passport.
To apply, you must download, complete, and submit the Application Documents which consist of:

- Application
- Confidential medical form
- Acknowledgement and Assumption of Risk and Release form
- Supplemental Medical Questionnaire (optional)

These documents along with a check for $1,500 payable to the Appalachian Mountain Club should be sent to: Stephen Cohen 2802 Arbor Drive #2 Madison, WI 53711. The balance of $3,000 is due August 1, 2020.

You will not be accepted and your check will not be deposited until the leader has determined by telephone conversation with you, that you and the trip are a good match. Deposit checks from waitlisted applicants will not be cashed until a spot is available, the applicant is accepted onto the trip, and they confirmed their continued interest.

**Participant Cancellation Policy**

Cancellation will not be allowed when it raises the cost to the other participants or to the leaders. The minimum cancellation fee is $200 once the trip has been declared a go. If actual costs (expenses already incurred on your behalf, and any unavoidable future expenses that will be incurred as a result of your registration and cancellation) are higher, they will be assessed instead, unless they can be applied toward another acceptable participant.

**Trip Cancellation Policy**

In the unlikely event that the trip is cancelled, everything you have paid to AMC for this trip will be refunded in full.

Participants are responsible for their own airline tickets and other external expenses. Most airlines no longer give refunds for cancellations; instead, they issue coupons for a future trip with an administrative charge and an expiration date. Trip cancellation insurance is advised. Policy information will be supplied to all participants.

**Disclosure**

AMC Adventure Travel trips are run on a nonprofit basis. Leaders are not compensated except for their travel and administrative costs associated with the trip. A program fee is assessed toward AMC Adventure Travel program and administrative expenses.
Trip Leader

Steve Cohen has been an active AMC adventure travel leader since 2012. He has led 23 hiking/trekking-oriented Adventure Travel trips to such destinations the Haute Route (from Chamonix, France to Zermatt, Switzerland), the Alta Via II through the Italian Dolomites, the tour of the Jungfrau region (Switzerland), Patagonia (Torres del Payne), the high mountains huts of Austria, etc. He lived in Europe for four years and is fluent in both French and German. Steve is chair of Adventure Travel. To learn more about Steve and his adventure travel expeditions, visit www.adventuretravelwithsteve.com

Reading list and other resources

Chulengo Expeditions has developed an EXTENSIVE reading list. Particularly with this expedition the more you read and understand ahead of time, the more you will get of this unique experience.

Photo credit: All photographs have been taken and supplied by Nadine Lehner, one of the co-founders of Chulengo Expeditions.