



LIVING ON THE EDGE

AFTER A 10-HOUR TREK TO WORSHIP AT THE IMMENSE GRANITE FEET OF CHILE'S FAMOUS TORRES DEL PAINE, WHAT COULD BE BETTER THAN A PLUNGE INTO LAKE PEHOÉ'S FRIGID WATERS BEFORE INDULGING IN A WELL-DESERVED SOAK IN AN OUTDOOR JACUZZI? OUR WRITER LEAVES HIS CAMPING GEAR AT HOME AND OPTS FOR SOME SERIOUS LUXURY AT THE EDGE OF THE WORLD

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DREAMTRIPS

PATAGONIA

The three distinctive granite peaks of Paine Massif are one of Patagonia's most famous symbols.



The view from the Explora lodge across Lake Pehoé towards the Grey Glacier and the breathtaking Valle del Francés.

THE DREAM?

Since time immemorial, ships arrived at Patagonia believing that they had reached the gates of the unknown 'Terra Australis', a legendary continent at the extreme southern end of the globe. Today Patagonia remains wonderfully wild and untamed. It's a place to cut yourself off from the world and surround yourself in unimaginable natural beauty.

THE REALITY?

Read on, beautiful dreamer...

STANDING AT THE BASE OF THE glacier-carved slate-grey granite spires that loom above me like solemn sentinels at the gateway to an impenetrable Valhalla, I feel like a pilgrim who has made a journey to the very edge of the world.

These two thousand-metre-high towers from which Chile's magnificent Torres del Paine National Park derives its name are among the most iconic images in South America, dominating the landscape of this 243,000-hectare nature reserve that's internationally-renowned for its incredible trekking and hiking opportunities.

It has taken me 10 years, several flights and a strenuous 10-hour hike to finally reach Torres del Paine, which is justifiably famous for its jagged, horn-shaped peaks, turquoise glacial lakes, electric-blue icebergs, rolling pampas and signature wildlife, including condors, flamingos, llama-like guanacos and the elusive puma.

I initially planned to reach the Towers while on a month-long solo backpacking trip through Patagonia in 2005, but a major fire broke out before I could reach it. Lasting for 10 days, it destroyed over 150-square-kilometres of grasslands and old growth forest. It also indefinitely postponed my journey to this pristine patch of the planet.

Now, I'm finally back. This time not as a hostel-hopping backpacker, but as a guest of Explora Patagonia, Torres del Paine's original all inclusive luxe eco-lodge.

First conceived to provide a unique

way of travelling to remote areas of South America while maintaining the 'luxury of the essential', the lodge first opened in 1993 in the wild heart of the park, soon cementing its reputation as *the* go-to all inclusive destination for affluent travellers searching for the perfect blend of creature comforts and aspirational adventure in a truly magical setting. Needless to say, I'm eager to experience whatever challenges Explora Patagonia can throw at me.

Adventurous travellers often tend to associate the term 'all inclusive' with overindulgence at cookie-cutter beach resorts and aboard cruise ships. But at Explora Patagonia, the concept has been interpreted very differently. Here, as I soon delightfully discover, it's all about disconnecting from civilization and reconnecting with nature through rugged, physically-challenging adventures, while still enjoying the creature comforts that come with staying at a high-end lodge.

ECO-CONSCIOUS DESIGN

I arrive at Explora after a five-hour complimentary shuttle ride from Punta Arenas airport, which is a three-hour flight south from Santiago. Perched like a white yacht sailing on those notorious Patagonian winds, it commands a spectacular location facing the Cuernos del Paine from across glittering Lake Pehoé, the most famous of the park's many glacial lakes.

Each of the lodge's 49 furnished yet luxurious TV-free guest rooms and suites welcomes the weary traveller with a sleek, cheerful, eco-conscious design featuring native lenga wood details, blond wicker furniture and almond wood floors. Each room consists of a small living area, hydro massage bath and incredibly comfortable beds, designed for a deep, relaxing sleep after a day of adventure. Best of all are the panoramic lake views; they are especially lovely at the moment as I'm here at the beginning of the austral summer and my room is bathed in brilliant sunlight for nearly 20 hours each day.

I soon discover that Explora Patagonia's tasteful simplicity also extends to its most popular amenity, Spa Ona, which is located in a large bathhouse located 100 metres from the main building via a sloped wood path running down to the lake. Spa Ona features a heated lap pool, four open-air Jacuzzis and >

The Torres del Paine
soar up to 2,500 metres
above sea level.



First opened in 1993, Explora's lodge has undergone extensive renovations and offers guests first class accommodation amid breathtaking natural beauty.

massage rooms. There's also a dock where seriously intrepid (read: crazy) travellers can take a cardiac arrest-inducing post-hike dip in the lake—the ice cold water is said to be an excellent tonic for sore muscles.

A LA CARTE EXPLORATIONS

Explora offers over 50 different half and full day treks and horseback rides, each led by well-qualified bilingual guides. The maximum group size is eight.

Over pre-dinner cocktails on my first evening I gather with fellow guests to listen as these guides explain the range of daily excursions available. You can cruise on the lodge's private catamaran across the turquoise waters of postcard-perfect Lake Pehoé towards the Grey Glacier, or horseback ride to the Laguna Verde. You can stroll beside the stunning Laguna Azul or take a seriously strenuous trek through the towering Cuernos del Paine deep into the magical Valle del Francés. Or you can explore the southern shore of Lago Sarmiento with its bizarre lime formations or make the famous pilgrimage to the base of those beloved Torres. There's no shortage of options and each exploration is an à la carte adventure.

The only lodge in the area with its own horses bred and trained especially for its guests, Explora Patagonia maintains a stable of over 20 horses, all raised and trained in Colunquén, a ranch in Central Chile that belongs to the Ibáñez family, Explora's owners. Led by a group of Chilean gauchos clad in traditional cowboy outfits, they are well-prepared to safely transport riders on incredibly photogenic routes high up onto the park's plateaus or across its flat, grassy plains. As with the guided hikes, ride duration and difficulty is tailored to each guest's preferences.

On my first outing, a meandering two-hour ride up to a panoramic viewpoint that overlooks the pampas, I quickly realize that experiencing Torres del Paine by horseback is an absolute highlight of the Explora experience, even if you're a novice rider like me.

MAGICAL MOMENTS

During my five-day stay at Explora I seize the opportunity to partake in a wide range of explorations, both on foot and by horseback. The most challenging trek is a 10-hour, 25-kilometre round-trip marathon

PHOTO TIPS

Torres del Paine is a photographer's dream destination. Here are some tips that can help you take stunning photos while you're there:

- Place an object, a person (or preferably a patient guanaco) in the foreground of your landscape shot to lend context and scale to your composition.
- To create dramatic moods, include Patagonia's epic cloud formations, from the ominous storm fronts to the spectacular lenticular clouds.
- Snow-covered peaks and glaciers can skew your white balance and your photos may appear grey. Adjust your exposure compensation accordingly or use a preset 'snow setting'.
- Avoid photographing landscapes in harsh midday sunshine, which can wash out all of the detail from your shot.
- Use a polarizing lens filter when photographing lakes and other bodies of still water to reduce surface glare.
- Keep an eye out for especially photogenic reflections of mountains, clouds or boats that can enhance your photos.
- When photographing wildlife, shoot from the animal's eye level for more powerful images.
- Always take plenty of SD memory cards, extra batteries and a small tripod with you, as well as a weather-proof shell for your gear in case you get caught out in wet weather.



Explora offers daily horseback rides led by local gauchos.



★ ← WHEN YOU GO →

- Air Canada offers daily non-stop flights from Toronto to Santiago. Flying time is approximately 11 hours. From Santiago, several daily flights on LAN or Sky Airline reach Punta Arenas. Explora arranges airport transport to the lodge, a drive of approximately 4.5 hours with a lunch break in picturesque Puerto Natales.
- If you want to stop over in Santiago prior to flying to Punta Arenas, the Doubletree by Hilton Hotel Santiago-Vitacura is an excellent choice. Offering views of the Andes, this is one of the city's newest hotels and it is centrally located near the Costanera Center shopping complex. It is just six kilometres from the 19th century La Moneda Palace.
- The weather in Torres del Paine can be unpredictable at any time of year (expect all seasons in a single day) but early austral summer (November) and late summer and autumn (March) are generally the best times to visit as the park is less crowded and the skies clear. In autumn the colours are especially stunning. Winter (June to Sept) can be an especially beautiful time to visit, although visitors should be prepared for variable weather conditions and limited hiking and riding opportunities due to snowy conditions at higher altitudes.
- In a place where you can literally experience four seasons in one day it's essential to dress for success. Pack multiple layers, including thick hiking socks, long underwear, short or long sleeved thermal t-shirts, trekking pants and shorts, a fleece top, a waterproof windbreaker and shell pants, warm gloves and hat and sturdy hiking boots that preferably rise above the ankle. Also imperative are sunglasses with UV filter, a sun hat to protect your face and ears from sun and wind, plenty of sunblock and a daypack.
- Rates at Explora start at US\$3,300 per four-day visit, per person based on double occupancy. That includes all meals, bar costs, guided exploration activities, Punta Arenas airport transfers and transfers to and from Punta Arenas.
- From mid-November to early March Explora operates set packages with fixed entry and departure dates. During the remainder of the year flexible arrival or departure dates are available.

through the lenga forests of the French Valley to the British Camp. This is arguably the park's most scenic location, set in a natural amphitheatre surrounded by panoramic views of Paine Grande on the west and spectacular Torres del Paine and Los Cuernos to the east. En route we stop at a breathtaking viewpoint to watch avalanches tumbling down from the crevasses of the hanging French Glacier.

The most relaxing excursion is a half-day ride across rivers, forests and pampas to reach the Laguna Negra lookout, an ideal location for spotting bird species such as southern lapwings and upland geese.

And my most satisfying challenge is completing that long-postponed eight-hour climb through the Ascencio Valley and up the steep slope to the base of the fabled Torres del Paine themselves. As I arrive the clouds shrouding them are briefly driven apart by the famously fierce and incessant Patagonian winds to reveal their austere grandeur. Journey's end, at last.

WATER AND WINE

Arriving back at Explora each evening I head straight for the spa. The rumours are true, I discover, as I plunge into Lake

Pehoé's frigid waters before indulging in a well-deserved soak in one of the outdoor Jacuzzis: dipping yourself into ice cold water does bring about recuperative wonders, although taking a near polar plunge is by any definition tough bodily self love.

I also enjoy rejuvenating massages followed by gourmet meals in the lodge's elegant yet understated dining room, never tiring of the breathtaking views of Lake Pehoé and the Macizo del Paine peaks from its wall-to-wall windows.

Explora claims that its dishes have been designed to enable guests to perform various explorations and still feel light, agile and healthy. With a choice of succulent dishes like Magellanic lamb, southern king crab and delicious fresh local fish and vegetables, always accompanied by superb Chilean wines, my recovery is most definitely assured.

So too is the promise of awakening each morning to another exhilarating day spent exploring this scenic wilderness. It may have taken a decade to finally reach South America's—and arguably the world's—most mesmerizing national parks, but the wait has been well worth it. Torres del Paine, we will meet again. ☉