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## Patagonia: South America's far-flung paradise

Teresa Levonian Cole is won over by two new and very different hotels that offer a spectacular window on the remote landscapes of Patagonia.



A view towards the towers of the Paine massif Photo: ALAMY

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By Teresa Levonian Cole

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Eat at the fruit of the califate bush, goes the saying, and your return to Patagonia is assured. On my last visit, I gorged hopefully on these little barberries. They duly delivered. Just 10 months later, I found myself once again flying over the spine of the Andes, whose glaciated lower vertebrae curve westwards towards the fjords. But whereas before I had stayed at the long-established Explora Hotel, in the heart of Torres del Paine National Park, the pretext for my return was the opening of two new hotels in this remotest of lands.

The long road from Punta Arenas airport, at the southern tip of the continent, bisects the pampas and its scattered estancias – a vast panorama dotted with wind-blasted beeches and home to loping rheas, anaemic flamingos and guanacos dishevelled by the indefatigable gales.

In 1878, Lady Florence Dixie, one of the first travellers to "this outlandish part of the world", ate her way through the Patagonian wildlife, native style, shot puma and condor and found creative use for the inedible (baby ostrich legs, she tells us in her *mémoire*, make "nice handles for umbrellas and whips").

Little has changed since in this majestic landscape of plains and snaggletooth mountains, though protection has been accorded to the fauna, and after 1893 sheep would become the economic mainstay and near-synonym of Patagonia, and the humble leitmotif of my journey.

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After two and a half hours, we branched off towards Puerto Natales, a town of some 19,000 souls, perched at the edge of Last Hope Sound – an aquatic labyrinth through which Juan de Ladrilleros sailed in 1557 in his final, doomed attempt to find the Pacific entrance to the Magellan Straits.

As we approached, an assemblage of metal chimneys and low industrial buildings came into view: we had reached our destination.

The Singular is, indeed, one of the most singular hotels you could hope to find: a former British-run refrigeration plant for "processing" sheep – now a carefully restored national monument, incorporating a fine museum of ancient machinery within its cavernous brick interior.

More than merely a brilliantly conceived hotel with fabulous views over the sound and snow-capped hills, it is integral to the region's social history. The factory was completed in 1915 by the Sociedad Explotadora de Tierra del Fuego – a multinational alliance of settlers who dominated sheep ranching in the Magallanes region, from its founding in 1893 until Allende's land reforms in the Seventies. Puerto Natales itself, something of a social hub in this Middle of Nowhere, developed to service the plant, and owes its existence to the former Frigorífico Bories.

At the pier, where ships once loaded meat and wool bound for Britain, we boarded the hotel's natty launch. "Our challenge is to persuade people that there is so much more to Chilean Patagonia than just Torres del Paine," said Pancho, one of the hotel's knowledgeable guides, as we set off on an excursion.

We navigated past Puerto Consuelo – still owned by the family of Hermann Eberhard, who settled here in 1893 and introduced sheep farming to the province – and sailed on through a disorienting jigsaw of islands and headlands.

"That's Antonio Varas Peninsula," said Captain Ulysses, indicating what I thought was a deserted island. "There is a remote estancia on it, where one man tends 200 sheep. You get there by boat, followed by four hours on horseback."

We reached the great face of Balmaceda's hanging glacier, and docked at Bernardo O'Higgins National Park – at 13,614 square miles, some 18 times larger than neighbouring Torres del Paine National Park.

By now, it had started to pour. Not that anyone minded. We climbed over glistening rocks, carpeted in velvety lichens and brilliant red firebushes, and walked through forests of gnarled beeches dripping spherical orange fungi like Christmas decorations to the scarred nose of the Serrano Glacier.

The only sounds were the patter of rain on the milky glacial lake, the whoosh of wind and the rumble of a distant avalanche cascading over seracs. In such overcast conditions, icebergs shine ever more radiantly blue. We collected glacier ice to clink in our glasses back on board as we cruised, scouting for condor nests in the cliffs, and watching sea wolves shower beneath a waterfall like a bride's veil.

Some 90 minutes' drive north from Puerto Natales, Tierra Patagonia was nearing completion. With no further hotels permitted in the Torres del Paine park, it squats inconspicuously on the reserve's eastern perimeter, a fluid structure made of local wood on the shore of Lake Sarmiento. From every window, the three towers of the Paine massif – which Florence termed "Cleopatra's Needles" – are framed.

"Everyone who comes to Patagonia wants to visit the lakes, mountains and waterfalls of the park, so of course we take them there," said the general manager, Chris Purcell, echoing The Singular's credo. "But our real aim is to concentrate on other equally beautiful areas where the tourist coaches cannot go."

Like The Singular, which has exclusive access to a private estancia, Tierra Patagonia bases its riding expeditions from nearby Estancia Cerro Guido, a 250,000-acre ranch of 50,000 sheep, where guests can also stay. There are 10 cosy and comfortable rooms in the Owner's House, which is faintly redolent of a Twenties English parsonage.

This is hard to beat for an experience of the self-sufficient infrastructure of estancia life: a quasi-feudal anachronism, its practices unchanged over time – from the arrival of a *comparsa* for the summer shearing to the round-up of wild horses to be broken in and coiffed.

Romantic image aside, however, there's no doubt that estancia life is a tough, lonely existence. Accompanied by two handsome gauchos in full regalia – berets, bombacha trousers, boots and elaborately customised belts with fearsome knives – we went riding, over hills strewn with pretty virgin's slippers, across streams, over plains, and past distant one-man outposts of the estancia system, known as *puestos*.

Some 40 miles from the Southern Ice Fields at the park's opposite extremity, the climate is drier, and beloved of guanacos that munch on thorny bushes. We came across one, the recent lunch of an elusive puma, over whose remains caracaras were now squabbling. Elsewhere, guanacos gawped at our approach. Apart from a solitary gaucho working his dogs, silhouetted against the horizon, there were no other humans in sight.

Next day, we hiked up a rugged scarp, picking our way through rough mata negra bushes. Near the summit, we stopped in our tracks. Just 100 yards off, a huge fledgling condor fluttered on a cliff ledge,

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steeling himself to take flight. Oblivious to our presence, he teetered, indecisive, till a gust of wind sent him soaring, higher and higher, over the valley below.

It was spectacular. And that evening, as we sipped pisco sours in the wood-stove warmth of the dining room and supped on estancia lamb, the clouds lifted to reveal the full height of three famous towers of the Paine massif. They are, if possible, even more impressive at dawn, when their pale granite blushes pink at the sight of the new day. It is a vision that merits an early breakfast.

But this time, alas, the califate berries were not in season. I wonder if the jam will work as well?

### Getting there

There are no direct flights to Santiago de Chile from the UK. The best options are to fly with Iberia (0870 609 0500; [iberia.com \(http://www.iberia.com\)](http://www.iberia.com)) to Madrid, connecting with LAN (0800 977 6100; [lan.com \(http://www.lan.com\)](http://www.lan.com)), from £850 return; or with British Airways (0844 493 0787; [ba.com \(http://www.ba.com\)](http://www.ba.com)) to Buenos Aires or São Paulo, connecting with LAN, from £931 and £888 respectively. You have to overnight in Santiago before flying on to Punta Arenas.

Hotels will generally offer complimentary airport transfers to and from Punta Arenas, and transport for excursions. You can also hire a car at Punta Arenas Airport from Alamo or Europcar, from around £270 per week. Book in advance at [arguscarhire.com \(http://www.arguscarhire.com\)](http://www.arguscarhire.com).

Further information from Turismo Chile ([chile.travel \(http://www.chile.travel\)](http://www.chile.travel)).

### Packages

Cox & Kings (0845 154 8941; [coxandkings.co.uk \(http://www.coxandkings.co.uk\)](http://www.coxandkings.co.uk)) organises luxury tours to Chile. An eight-night private tour, including three nights at The Aubrey in Santiago, two nights at The Singular, three nights at Tierra Patagonia, all flights, transfers, excursions and full board in Patagonia, from £4,145 per person.

Sunvil Traveller (020 8758 4774; [sunvil.co.uk \(http://www.sunvil.co.uk\)](http://www.sunvil.co.uk)) offers nine nights from £3,389 per person; Journey Latin America (020 3432 1515; [journeylatinamerica.co.uk \(http://www.journeylatinamerica.co.uk\)](http://www.journeylatinamerica.co.uk)) offers a 13-night group tour overview of Argentine and Chilean Patagonia, from £2,698 per person.

### When to go

Some hotels close in winter (June to August), when snow blankets the landscape. Spring and autumn are the most colourful. Summer (December to March) is high season, but comes with biting winds. Avoid January and February, when the parks become crowded.

### The inside track

Don't miss a boat trip to one of the glaciers: either Serrano, in Bernardo O'Higgins National Park, or Grey Glacier in Torres del Paine National Park.

There is little to buy in Puerto Natales besides sheepskin slippers and chunky knits, but two shops stand out: Machi (Eberhard 226) has some wonderful silver Mapuche jewellery and unusual bowls made. Next door, Kajenk has a range of artisanal clothing.

### The best hotels

Unless otherwise stated, prices include full board, excursions in and around Torres del Paine National Park, and airport transfers in Patagonia.

#### Estancia Cerro Guido ££

Fifteen simple but comfortable rooms on a working sheep ranch; manageress Paola de Smet d'Olbecke ensures guests experience all the advantages and none of the hardships of a gaucho's life – and are well fed on home-grown produce. The ranch also holds sites of archaeological interest (0056 61 360305; [cerroguido.cl](http://www.cerroguido.cl) (<http://www.cerroguido.cl>)); three nights from £1,150 per person; b & b from £130 per night).

#### The Singular ££

An extraordinary hotel with 56 elegant, comfortable bedrooms in a new wing, inventive menus, private speedboats and “the largest spa in Patagonia”. Just outside Puerto Natales and some 90 miles from Torres del Paine National Park (61 722030; [thesingular.com](http://www.thesingular.com) (<http://www.thesingular.com>)); three nights from £800 per person; b & b from £180 per night).

#### Patagonia Camp £££

In a forest overlooking Lake Toro, just outside the southern end of the Torres del Paine National Park. Eighteen yurt-style tents, with wooden interiors and en-suite bathrooms. Some tents hang from the cliff above the waters (23 349255; [patagoniacamp.com](http://www.patagoniacamp.com) (<http://www.patagoniacamp.com>)); minimum three-night stay from £1,150 per person).

#### Tierra Patagonia £££

Opened late last year, this 40-room rustic resort sits just outside the eastern limit of Torres del Paine National Park, on Lake Sarmiento, facing the towers, which you can also admire from the spa. Excursions include riding at Estancia Cerro Guido (22 630606; [tierrapatagonia.com](http://www.tierrapatagonia.com) (<http://www.tierrapatagonia.com>)); minimum three-night stay from £1,265 per person).

### The best restaurants in Puerto Natales

#### Ultima Esperanza £

A simple restaurant with a small menu and great for fish. Try the king crab starter (Eberhard 354; 61 411391).

**Afrigonia** ££

When a Chilean lady fell for an African gentleman the result was this quirky restaurant and some of the finest food in Puerto Natales (Eberhard 343; 61 412232).

**El Asador Patagónico** ££

Specialises in barbecued lamb, Patagonian style (Arturo Prat 158; 61 413553).

**What to avoid**

It is always colder than one expects in Patagonia, even in summer, with biting winds and sudden squalls. Take layers, waterproofs and windproof clothing.

Despite the above, the weather is very unpredictable, and the effects of the sun can be ferocious, even when overcast.

Don't try to do the journey in one. Not only would it be exhausting, but the inevitable delays might mean missed connections. A break in Santiago, either end, is advisable and also fun.

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