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So Far, So Good

Chilean Patagonia is a remote land of blue glaciers, odd creatures, imaginative architecture and some of the most beautiful adventures on earth

By [SARA CLEMENCE](#)



Singular Hotels / SOUTH SCENES The view of Last Hope Sound from a guest room at the Singular Patagonia

They say that at the bottom of South America, you experience all four seasons in one day. They're wrong.

It's true that the weather changes quickly and dramatically, but in what summer do you go scouting for glacial ice to put in cocktails? What's the right time of year for bees the

size and color of kumquats? What weather pickles the hide of a giant sloth, making it last for 10,000 years?

Maybe, in addition to winter, spring, summer, fall, there should be a season called Patagonia.

Photos: A Patagonian Paradise



Sara Clemence | The spires of Torres del Paine National Park

It hardly needs to be said that lower Patagonia is one of the most storied and remote places on earth. The Chilean side (it spans part of Argentina as well) was almost exclusively home to indigenous tribes until the mid-19th century, when some hardy Europeans started arriving to raise sheep and cattle. In the 1970s, when British novelist Bruce Chatwin wrote his defining book, "In Patagonia," he described a land of icy fiords and mysterious caves, still the preserve of adventurers and misfits.

Even today, Patagonia feels otherworldly, untamed and quite strange, even—maybe especially—from the comfort of a super-luxurious hotel.

My husband and I went deep into Chilean Patagonia in January, the height of summer in the Southern Hemisphere, to experience its raw beauty—and to counteract our urban existence by taking on as many adventure activities as possible in four days. I planned to see my first glacier, ride horseback and summit a set of granite spires in Torres del Paine National Park. We'd be aided by the sun, which at such low latitudes stays aloft for some 17 hours a day.



Andrew Sanocki | A gaucho herding

The trip required two flights from Temuco, a city about halfway down the length of the country, and a long drive on a rutted highway, past shrub-filled valleys and craggy mountain ranges. After three hours, we came over a hill to Seno Última Esperanza—Last Hope Sound. The fierce wind that had been shoving our vehicle into oncoming cars was whipping the

deep-blue fiord into a frenzy. The van pulled into a long, dim warehouse with a worn tin roof, part of a former slaughterhouse complex.

"Is this where they dump the bodies?" I whispered to my husband.

“We'd gone from a scenic western to a bleak murder mystery to a real world version of 'Myst.'”

At the end of the emptiness was a room framed in glass and steel. A bellhop ushered us into a tiny, clear-sided funicular that glided down the slope and into the brick lobby of the [Singular Patagonia hotel](#), which late last year unveiled its imaginative overhaul of a historic sheep processing plant. In 20 minutes, we'd gone from a scenic western to a bleak murder mystery to a real-world version of the '90s videogame "Myst."

It was late afternoon and flushed, excited guests were starting to return from the day's kayaking, hiking and boat trips. As distinctive and inviting as the hotel was—our room had a full wall of glass overlooking the sound; the industrial-chic dining room boasted brick walls, funky brass lamps and cushy leather seating—we wanted to get moving. We borrowed a couple of shiny mountain bikes to ride three miles to the nearby town of Puerto Natales, but the 30-mile-an-hour gusts beat us into retreat.



Andrew Sanocki | The Singular's dining room

Instead, we walked in 8 p.m. daylight around the "neighborhood," a half-dozen modest houses clustered on a point overlooking the sound. It was a chance to focus on the breathtaking scenery, which in Patagonia changes constantly along with the weather. Mists part, waters roil, mountains silently appear and disappear from view. Look away from a mirror-flat fiord reflecting a mound of clouds, and when you turn back there may be milky waters below a snow-capped mountain streaked with sunlight.

We proceeded almost reverently; there were so many layers of landscape to take in. Horses grazed in fields marked with rough posts, oblivious to the mountain ranges behind them. The wind made feathery grass undulate like a golden sea. A friendly mutt accompanied us down the road until a large, speedy gray hare appeared in some brush.

The next morning we were determined to be less leisurely, and piled into a van for a half-day hike in

Cueva del Milodón Natural Monument. In the late 19th century, explorers found, in a 260-foot-deep cave, the hide of a huge, hairy creature. The skin looked so fresh the animal was thought to have recently died, but it turned out to be the 10,000-year-old remnants of a mylodon, an extinct 10-foot-tall sloth.

Our guide led us along a pleasant and sometimes hilly path; we paused to examine a delicate porcelain orchid and to gasp at views. In one cave, we donned headlamps and got a thrill squeezing through a low passage to a rear chamber. But in the main cave there was something more exciting: dozens of light-brown hairs bristling out of a patch of ground. There were no scientists around to confirm it, but we think we touched the fur of a long-lost beast.



Sara Clemence | The Wall Street Journal | A guanaco at rest

The food served at the Singular may be some of the best in Chile (the service is warm but a little disorganized). Menus change daily and include indulgences like lamb prosciutto and beet gnocchi, served with wine or Ferran Adrià's gastronomic beer. A three-course lunch was just what we needed for fuel—we spent the afternoon on horseback in nearby hills, crossing small creeks, picking through yellow-flowered shrubs and urging the horses up rocky hillsides. All

around, always, was a huge sky and the ever-changing vista.

The sun signaled that we had time for more fun—specifically, dual massages and a swim in the hotel's indoor-outdoor pool. We dove under a glass partition and sat outside wet-haired, close to the edge of the fiord.



Sara Clemence | The Wall Street Journal
A glacier at Bernardo O'Higgins National Park

I was light with anticipation the third day—I'd wanted to see a glacier for years, and when wildfires in the area had threatened to derail our trip, my stomach ached with disappointment. But conditions were ripe for a boat trip to Bernardo O'Higgins National Park. Speeding through Last Hope Sound, we passed cliff walls with swirling rock patterns and narrow glacial waterfalls. Far off, we could see pale patches that marked the edges of ice fields. Then, rounding a bend, we came squarely upon a bright glacier that seemed to pour from the top of a ridge down to the water, framed by dark crags.

Pulling up to a silent dock, we disembarked for another hike, spotting buttercups the size of pinkie nails and the aforementioned bee, which our guide described as "friendly." He pointed out blue calafate berries; local lore says that if you eat one, you will someday come back to Patagonia. Our trail ended near the foot of a turquoise glacier. The balmy weather encouraged lingering—long enough to hear the deep booms and crashes that signaled the glacier was calving, and to catch the rare sight

of a huge tooth of ice toppling over and smashing before it vanished into a crevice. Before he turned the boat home, our captain circled the inlet looking for tiny icebergs to cool our drinks.

There was one big item left on our list, so after another decadent lunch we hustled to Hotel Las Torres, at the base of the national park's trademark spires. But Patagonia is huge; we got there around 7 p.m., and had to leave early the next day for a six-hour ride to the airport.

The consolation prize was a 90-minute hike to a lagoon. Around 9 p.m., having clambered down boulders, slogged up hills and marveled that we were the only people in sight, we arrived at the sapphire-blue lake. It was so much, yet not enough. We told each other that the towers were slathered with mist anyway. And at least, we said, we'd eaten the berries.



The Lowdown: Chilean Patagonia

Planning: Santiago Adventures handled most of our logistics; agents can get cheaper airfares in Chile, and they helped us change plans when wildfires hit Patagonia (santiagoadventures.com).

Getting There: Punta Arenas's Presidente Carlos Ibáñez International Airport receives flights from Santiago and a few other Chilean cities. It takes at least two hours to drive to Puerto Natales and five hours to Torres del Paine.

Staying There: The Singular has 54 rooms and three suites; service isn't as consistent as it should be at these prices (a front desk clerk got ratty when we didn't understand her rapid-fire Spanish), but may improve over time. Rooms can be booked with breakfast or all-inclusive, which covers the excellent meals, drinks and excursions (from \$660 per night for two, thesingular.com). Hotel Las Torres, in Torres del Paine National Park, is family-friendly and less expensive. But it can feel a tad backpacker-y, and food choices are limited (from about \$230 per night for two, lastorres.com).

What to Do: Guided excursions include horseback riding, hiking, kayaking, boat trips and more. You can do some activities on your own—hiking from Hotel Las Torres, for example.

What to Pack: Layers are crucial; even in summer, temperatures can veer from the 40s to the 70s. Bring hiking shoes, a hat, sunscreen and a sleep mask, since the sun is up before 6 and sets after 10.