

Walking on water

Global warming getting you down? Well, in Southern Patagonia there's at least one place where the ice age is still very much alive. Measuring roughly the size of the US state of Connecticut, the southern Patagonian ice field is the largest block of ice outside the world's polar regions.

When the last ice age ended some 11-12,000 years ago the glaciers covering most of Patagonia retreated to the Andes, in the process carving for themselves two impenetrable plateaus, called, in Spanish, **Campo de Hielo Norte** and **Campo de Hielo Sur** (the North and South Ice Fields). From this frozen sheet of ice flow the grandiose glaciers, lakes and valleys that are the hallmark of Patagonia's paradisiacal southern landscape – Mount Fitz Roy, Cerro Torre, Torres del Paine and Perito Moreno glacier to name a few.

the off-trail hikes through the largely unsettled Tierra del Fuego archipelago. For a round-up of the main attraction in each park, see p47 **National Parks at a glance.**

Although Patagonia is undoubtedly one of the great trekking capitals of the world, it's also still very much a secret. Except in the more popular trails of a few, easily accessed national parks – Torres del Paine, Nahuel Huapi and Los Glaciares – most trails are amazingly empty.

WHEN TO GO AND FINDING YOUR WAY

With such remoteness comes responsibility. Getting lost is easy in Patagonia. And if you do, rescue searches are unreliable. For self-reliant trekkers, well versed in the use of a compass and topographical maps, that's probably one of the region's most alluring features. But for the rest of us mere mortals, it's necessary to take certain precautions.

Marked trails, when they exist, are usually inferior to those in the US and Europe, above the tree line consisting of little more than an isolated, low-lying cairn every few kilometres. Even on better-known trails like the seven-day Paine circuit, which is quickly approaching congestion, it's possible to get lost in areas of dense forest, and as many mountainous areas in Patagonia are still unsettled, you're unlikely to run into anything more than an abandoned shack if you lose your bearings.

Every hiker, therefore, should take along a map, available at shops close to popular

For decades venturing into the white abyss was the privilege of a few intrepid adventurers. Indeed, despite several attempts, not until a few years ago had any expedition been able to cross its entire 300-kilometre (186-mile) length from north to south. But now a handful of Argentine guides have started leading small groups on eight-day traverses through the icecap's less hairy parts. Although a 1999 treaty awarded sovereignty over the bulk of the *hielos* to Chile, the ice cap is most easily accessed from the Argentine town of El Chaltén.

Any visit to this sea of frozen water is a struggle against the elements. The craggy ridges that bound it on all sides are the most austral natural barrier in the southern hemisphere and infamous for trapping the blustering winds that whip off the Antarctic peninsula. Finding refuge against these gales, which frequently

trekking destinations. Although the region boasts few native sherpas or porters, the services of English-speaking mountain guides are easy to hire via tourist offices and the better hotels. Otherwise, topographical and satellite maps of varying detail and quality are available in each country's capital from the military mapmaking agencies, for those who know how to use them: the **Instituto Geográfico Militar** (Avenida Cabildo 381, 011 4576 5545, www.igm.gov.ar, open 9am-2pm Mon-Fri), and at Santiago's **Instituto Geográfico Militar** (Dieciocho 369, 02 460 6800, www.igm.cl, open 9am-5.30pm Mon-Fri). Mountain clubs, called *clubes de montaña* or Club Andino are found in several towns on both sides of the Andes and sell cheap maps to lesser known trails as well as providing advice to trekkers. One of Latin America's most prestigious mountain clubs is in Patagonia – the **Club Andino Bariloche** (see p90).

Patagonia's weather is extremely temperamental: four seasons in a single hour is how locals describe the region's abrupt climatic changes. Indeed, it's not uncommon at more southerly latitudes to experience blinding snow squalls in the middle of summer, or mini heat waves in the dead of winter. Take foul weather gear even if the sky is blue when setting out.

The region's infamous winds can convert even the sturdiest of tents into kites during storms, especially when above the tree line. But for all that, Patagonia is not only one of



world's most benign environments for hikers. It's lower than the Andean high plains, enjoys a climate free of tropical diseases and is without dangerous predators. The most bothersome pest is the *tábano*, a blood-sucking horsefly that takes over the humid forests in January and February and is a serious irritation.

On the upside, pristine mountain streams and glacier-fed rivers, provide some of the cleanest freshwater you can drink anywhere in the world. Although on trails frequented by livestock, worrywarts might be advised to use iodine tablets or filtering systems. Fires at most parks are strictly prohibited owing to the risk of spreading blazes from strong winds.

Most national parks fill up during between December and February, when temperatures are highest and the sun sets as late as 11pm. As it's the busy holiday season, spaces at hotels and *refugios* (mountain refuges), especially in Torres del Paine, fill up quickly. In Argentina, near El Bolsón and Bariloche, otherwise tranquil camp sites can be flooded with Argentine teenagers drinking and playing guitars until the wee hours of the morning.

To avoid disturbances, nature lovers should come at the beginning and end of the summer: November and March/April. The weather remains agreeable, by Patagonian standards, from October until May, though transport and accommodation are harder to come by then. Temperatures drop significantly in winter, but

reach 150 kilometres (93 miles) per hour, is impossible. The only organic material able to survive the sub-zero temperatures of the icecap is the tundra found on the isolated nunataks, the rocky islets whose summits project spectacularly from their bleach-white surroundings.

For fit trekkers, there are two recommended Argentine guiding services that will take interested groups on to the *hielos*: Bariloche-based **Instituto Argentino de Montañismo** (www.iamsite.com.ar), run by guide Diego Magaldi, who trained in the United States, leads five expeditions a year including a rare winter excursion. Further south in Santa Cruz province, El Chaltén pioneer Alberto del Castillo's **Fitz Roy Expediciones** (02962 493017, <http://elchalten.com/fitzroy/>) is the other local Patagonian outfitter with experience guiding groups on to the ice.

tend to be more stable. For experienced trekkers with flexible schedules, nothing beats stepping into a pair of snowshoes and heading off into the hills in nobody else's footprints other than a few guanacos and pumas.

WHAT TO BRING AND OTHER TIPS

One of Patagonia's best-kept secrets is the wide range of wild trekking across ostensibly private property. Except in a few cases, *estancia* owners allow trekkers to cross their fences provided they respect the general rule of taking just photographs and leaving only footprints. Out of courtesy and your own safety, however, it's best to ask permission before camping. For experienced trekkers, this is an especially attractive way to see otherwise inaccessible areas in underdeveloped Central Patagonia.

Unless you have prior permission from Argentina's National Guard or Chile's Carabineros, avoid any hike that takes you across the two countries' extremely porous border. Cases of foreign hikers being detained for entering or leaving Argentina illegally around Laguna del Desierto, near El Chaltén, have been reported. Increasingly, however, some cross-border hikes – such as that from **Cochamo** in Chile to **Lago Puelo** in Argentina – do now enjoy official approval and require little more than getting your passport stamped at the border outpost. Assuming navigating skills aren't a problem,