



Towers of Paine & Fitz Roy

Introduction

At the southern tip of South America lie some of the most spectacular mountains in the western hemisphere. Magnificent spires and cathedrals of rock soar out of the Patagonian landscape and provide some of the most difficult and sought after climbs in South America. The region also offers some excellent trekking and our trip will explore the two principal mountain regions, the Towers of Paine massif and the Fitz Roy / Cerro Torre group.

Our trip begins with a flight via Buenos Aires to Calafate in the south of Argentina. From here we head south to the Paine National Park where we begin the first stage of our trek. The Parque Nacional Torres del Paine is sandwiched between the vast windswept steppes of Patagonia and the massive southern continental ice sheet. The area occupies a zone of climatic transition, with highly localised weather conditions. There is a corresponding diversity of flora and fauna. Guanaco and Nandu are a common sight in the sparse steppes and grassland of the eastern sector and Condors can be seen soaring around the precipitous peaks.

Standing apart from the lower ranges that surround it, the craggy mountains of the park make a breathtaking sight when first viewed from the road. Rising out of a largely flat and barren plain at barely 100 metres, the massif's highest summits reach heights in excess of 3,000 metres. The park gets its name from three magnificent frost polished columns of pink granite.

The Towers of Paine, three huge pillars of rock, are only part of an extensive massif which has several snow capped peaks including Cerro Paine Grande. Our trek takes us initially to the foot of the Towers before embarking on a circuit of the whole Paine massif. The walk circumnavigates the Massif, offering constantly changing views of this extraordinary range. The route follows the Rio Paine into increasingly remote and forested country, eventually crossing a high pass to reach the valley of the huge Glacier Grey. This vast 17 km-long glacier is the central feature of the north-west corner of the park. Glacier Grey discharges into Lago Grey, sending numerous icebergs to gradually drift south across the lake's turquoise waters. Our route continues along the course of the glacier to a final and spectacular lakeside campsite and a boat journey.

The vast Parque Nacional Los Glaciares stretches some 200 km north to south along the eastern edge of the continental ice sheet and is probably the greatest single tract of true wilderness left in Argentina. The landscape here is totally dominated by ice age glaciation. At the far north end of Los Glaciares lies one of the most magnificent and famous mountain areas in the Andes - Cerro Torre and Cerro Fitz Roy which rise abruptly from the flat Patagonian steppes.

The polished vertical rock walls of the Cerro Torre granite needle were for decades considered impossible to climb, making it one of the most talked about mountains in the world, partly because it repulsed so many attempts to climb it. Then in 1970 an Italian Alpinist, Cesare Maestri conquered the route amidst bitter controversy when it was discovered that his party had used a drill to fix bolts in a line to the summit. Now the area attracts climbing expeditions from all over the world.

Cerro Fitz Roy is easily the highest peak in the area at 3,441 metres and can be seen frequently along the trail. The local Tehuelche tribe of Indians believed Fitz Roy to be a volcano when they named it "Chalten". It must have been a prominent landmark during their annual migrations from the Atlantic to the Cordillera. Valleys lead into these ranges to directly below many of the peaks and give trekkers relatively straightforward access to the finest scenery. Southern Patagonia is unquestionably one of the world's most ruggedly beautiful places and visitors to these superb national parks are rewarded with a unique and unforgettable experience.

Itinerary

Day 1

We depart the UK for our flight to Argentina.

Day 2

We arrive in Buenos Aires at Ministro Pistarini International Airport. After clearing customs and immigration we make the one hour bus transfer to the domestic Jorge Newbury airport in Buenos Aires and fly to Rio Gallegos in the southern part of Patagonia. We transfer to our central hotel and will have the afternoon to relax.

Day 3

From Rio Gallegos we drive across southern Arnetina to the border with Chile. Our destination is the pleasant fishing port of Puerto Natales.

Day 4

After breakfast we board our private vehicle and make the 3 hour drive to the Paine National Park. We camp at Las Torres at the entrance to the Park. Being so far south it stays light until very late so if the weather is good we should get some fantastic evening views of the Paine massif.

Day 5

A day hike up into Valle Ascencio to the foot of the celebrated Towers of Paine. These spectacular granite spires are a magnet for rock climbers from all over the world. The tallest of these towers, the Central Tower of Paine, was first climbed in 1963 by Don Whillans and Chris Bonington. We can have a picnic lunch by the new refuge at the foot of the towers and in the afternoon we return to our campsite by refuge Las Torres.

Day 6

From Las Torres we have a very short drive around to Laguna Azul where we begin the trek around the Paine massif. Pack horses will transport all our personal and communal equipment, leaving us free to trek with just a light day sack. The trek follows an easy path through pleasant woodland and across open grassy moorland to the grey glacial waters of Lago Paine with its isolated refuge and camping ground. We are rewarded with views of the Southern Patagonian Icecap and the spectacular Dickson Glacier.

Day 7

From Lago Paine we follow the eastern bank of the Rio Paine as far as the new Refuge Dickson. The scenery on this section of the walk is reminiscent of Alaska with a vast expanse of forests and lakes before us. We camp in the grassy meadow outside the refuge.

Day 8

For the next three days we will need to carry all our personal equipment plus a share of the communal supplies as the terrain is too rugged for the pack horses. Any equipment surplus to requirements can be sent back with the pack horses. Today is a short trek which will ease us into this gradually. We trek along the Los Perros river and the path begins to climb steadily through virgin beech forest to the beautiful Laguna Los Perros where we camp.

Day 9

The path emerges out of the trees and ascends the hillside on increasingly rough ground before reaching the crest of the Paso John Gardner at just over 1,200 metres. The view which opens up before us is outstanding as we gaze over a huge glacial ice cap extending several miles to snowy mountains on the horizon. We descend steeply across a stony hillside and then through dense pine forest to reach a campsite at the foot of the pass, and overlooking the glacier.

Day 10

A spectacular day as we follow a path contouring high above the glacier. Some of the path has been obstructed by fallen trees and progress can be slow and tiresome. Eventually we emerge close to the snout of the glacier and can look back at the point where the glacier merges with the lake. The glacier actually calves off into Lago Grey and it is possible to see massive chunks of ice breaking off from the snout of the glacier and falling into the lake amid a deafening roar. We camp adjacent to the Refugio Glacier Grey.

Day 11

In the morning our pack horses will come up to the refuge to meet us and take our loads for the final day of the circuit. From glacier grey we follow a delightful sandy path through pleasant vegetation to Refugio Pehoe where we camp. The

refugio and campsite are beautifully located on the shores of the turquoise Lago Pehoe and the views of the Paine massif are absolutely stunning.

Day 12

We depart from Pehoe by the regular catamaran service which plys across the lake. We meet up with our private transport and drive back to Calafate in Argentina. We stay in a comfortable hotel and will be able to wash away the trail dust of the previous week.

Day 13

We have a rest day in El Calafate and will be able to visit the fantastic Perito Moreno Glacier.

Day 14

An early morning start for the bus journey to El Chalten at the entrance to Los Glaciares National Park. After signing in at the park gates we drive for a further 2km to the roadhead where there are sensational views of the Fitz Roy group. We trek along the Rio Electrico to our camp near Laguna Capri, situated in a tremendous location with the peaks of Cerro Torre (3128m) and Cerro Fitz Roy (3441m) towering over us.

Day 15

From our camp we are able to make leisurely day hikes up in to the mountains. The exact itinerary may vary according to the unpredictable weather and the level of the rivers. On the first day one option is to visit Cerro Torre basecamp by the grey waters of Lago Torre.

Day 16

Today we will be able to hike up to Laguna de los Tres for closer views of Cerro Fitz Roy. We may also wish to trek around to the north side of the mountain along the Rio Electrico to Piedra del Fraile. All the options are sensational and there are superb views from where ever we trek in this magnificent mountain arena.

Day 17

We trek back to El Chalten and return by bus to our hotel in Calafate.

Day 18

After a leisurely morning we drive to the airport for our return flight to Buenos Aires. We overnight in Buenos Aires at the centrally located Phoenix Hotel situated on Avenida Cordoba, one of the cities main thoroughfares. We are within easy walking distance of the Florida and Lavalle districts which are home to many of the cities best restaurants and nightlife. We are also just a short taxi ride from the fashionable Recoleta district where Eva Peron is buried. For carnivores in the group there will be an opportunity to indulge at one of Buenos Aires's best steak houses.

Day 19

Most of the day will be free at leisure. In the afternoon we travel to the airport for the flight from Buenos Aires back to London.

Day 20

Arrive back into UK