

BLACK SHEEP

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The Road Less Traveled Freedom in Patagonia



By C.J. Wilson

It never would have occurred to me to rent a car here in Chilean Patagonia. With good public transportation,

you can get to most of the best-known parks, tourist highlights, and most towns and villages. So why would you want to rent a car? Well, a rental car can take you to places where buses don't go, and some of those places are definitely worth a visit.

When my dad and his partner visited, we traveled by bus and Navimag to get from Santiago to Puerto Natales. From Puerto Varas, we decided to go to Chiloé to see the penguins. Rather than taking a tour, we rented a car, giving us the flexibility to stop and visit towns a long the way. The rental process was smooth, and we had a great adventure, out on our own in rural Chiloé. (It is possible to see much of Chiloé by bus, but public transport doesn't go to the pinguinera).

We also rented a car in Puerto Natales, which allowed us to take more time to see the Park than the one-day swing through. We went to Laguna Azul, and Cascada Rio Paine, and spent two nights in Río Serrano. This gave us time to enjoy a relaxed trip to Lago Grey with lunch, a hike to Mirador Ferrier, and a walk across the beach to see the chunks of glacier close-up. Of course, waking up in Río Serrano with sunrise on the Cuernos was unforgettable.

Some of the magic of being in Patagonia is in getting off the beaten track, which isn't always easy to do at one of South America's most popular national parks. Renting a car gives you flexibility that can be priceless.

To help keep the cost down, consider getting together with one or two other travelers with similar philosophy and budget. Pile your camping gear in the trunk, and head to the parks of Chiloé or the lesser-known areas of Torres del Paine. Do some research beforehand, to ensure that you can get to where you want to go with 2-wheel drive. Ask around to find out what your camping options are, which can also cut down on costs. Camping away from the most popular places probably means free or less expensive. For example, from Guardería Lago Grey, there is free camping and an unattended refugio less than a mile from the ranger station. From there, you can hike or backpack to the Pingo area, with Mirador Zapata, a little-visited part of the park with completely different views and a waterfall.

So, as you consider your traveling options, don't rule out the possibility of renting a car. You may find that your most memorable experiences are those which take you down the road less-traveled.

Note: It is not recommended to cross international borders in a rental car. Leave the border crossings to the tour companies or bus companies to avoid complications.

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Cycling Chiloé: Castro and Chiloe National Park



Exploring the old country on two wheels.

Chiloé is one of the most interesting places to visit in the Chilean Lake Region, with its beautiful scenery, and colorful, picturesque towns. Chiloé is a large island, which has helped minimize outside influences and preserve its unique culture.

A great way to visit the island is by bicycle. You can explore Castro, one of the oldest towns in Chile, and also visit Chiloé National Park, located in the sector called Cucao, 60 kilometers from Castro, on the Pacific coast.

Here's an outline for a three-day trip, beginning in Puerto Varas, jumping-off point for many interesting activities in the region.

On the first morning, we load our bicycles onto our vehicle, and head directly to Castro, choosing to avoid cycling on the northernmost road of the island, which has a lot of truck traffic..

To reach Chiloe, we cross the Chacao channel with a 45 minute ferry ride. Once in Castro, we can visit the market, museums, palafitos (houses on stilts), and church, and enjoy the flavors of the island in one of the local eateries..

For lodging, the new Hostal Palafito is a good choice, located in the Gamboa area. The hostal runs out of a traditional palafito, restored and upgraded to host travelers. It offers an unforgettable

experience, a snapshot into the ancestral dress and activity of this land, along with an excellent vista of the bay.

The following day, we climb on our bikes early in the morning, heading toward Route 5. Leaving Castro, we pass the church of Nercón. At 20 kilometers, at the latitude of Chonchi, is the side road toward Cucao and the Pacific Ocean. Lake Hullinco and Cucao offer enchanting scenery.

At 38 kilometers, we arrive at the national park entrance, next to the sea. The majesty of the place draws us in. We have the option to stay the night at Parador Darwin, with excellent service, and unforgettable food. Or we can camp in the Chanquin and Cole-Cole sections of the park.

The morning of our third and last day of the trip, we visit the main trails and beaches of the Park, leaving us with an unforgettable image of Chiloe, with its ancient forests, rich birdlife, and the Chilote culture woven into the fabric of this magical place.

By Ernesto Palm del Curto • Translated by Carolina Wilson

IF time permits, we have the option of visiting the indigenous community of Quilque, located in this sector. If we obtain permission from the community leaders, we can follow a new route in the Park, which takes us to the intersection at Lago Cucao.

Finally it is time to savor our last moments in the National Park, with the option to return to Puerto Varas the same day, or to remain on Chiloe and continue discovering the secrets and myths of this unique island.

Ernesto Palm del Curto lives in Puerto Varas, "land of rain, wind and ancient trees", which he deeply loves. He shares his passion for this region and its wild places with others through La Comarca Puelo Adventure, which offers a range of trips, as well as logistical support for self-guided treks and rides.