

Uncharted Patagonia

Northern Patagonia is emerging from the shadow of its legendary counterpart, Southern Patagonia.

The 770-mile-long Carretera Austral is the missing piece in many Patagonian trips. This remote area of Northern Patagonia is home to 17 designated protected areas yet lacks the crowds of its southern counterparts. Luxury accommodations are a newer concept here and the logistics of navigating rocky roads and mountain passes without phone service can be challenging. Outfitter **Extraordinary Journeys** (extraordinaryjourneys.com) knows the way, keeping in close contact with its local experts in order to organize weeklong trips for discerning clients.

Jump right into the adventure by hopping in a kayak on the first day. Roughly three hours from Balmaceda Airport, glacial Carrera Lake is home to the magnificent Marble Caves (sometimes called the Marble Cathedral). Over thousands of years, wind and water masterfully sculpted these famous geological features. The only way to see them is by boat—and to get up close you need a kayak. The artistry of the elements is on full display here: Glacial silt gives the lake (Chile's largest) a turquoise hue; minerals on the rocks create beautiful striations and patterns. The entire scene changes colors depending on the lighting, making each visit unique.

In the morning, set off on a full-day excursion in Laguna San Rafael National Park in search of a different natural wonderland. The lush forest eventually gives way to the rocky, moon-like moraine with panoramic views of 13,000-foot Mount San Valentín and the Exploradores Glacier that descends from the Northern Patagonian Ice Field. Once on ice (suited up in crampons, gaiters, and a helmet), guests begin a two-hour glacier trek along the world's second-largest contiguous non-polar ice field. Avoiding sneaky crevasses (that initially

look like any other divot in the glacier) requires digging your crampon spikes into the ice with force. You'll walk the same way while exploring the numerous ice caves, some with slick, neon-blue tunnels that plunge into alarmingly infinite darkness. Afterward, join seemingly everyone else in town for a beer at the local pub in Puerto Río Tranquilo and eventually retire to family-owned ecolodge, Mallín Colorado, in time for an elegantly plated dinner and lively conversation.

Wake for tea on your cabin's wooden terrace, looking across General Carrera Lake toward the mountains and listening to the birds. Back on the road, make a brief stop at the Confluence of Ríos Baker and Neff to marvel at the two rivers colliding into a fast-paced, electric-blue waterway. Further down the road in the Chacabuco Valley is Patagonia National Park, in the heart of the Carretera Austral. Explora opened the park's first and only lodge in 2021. The stone hideaway is home base for a few nights to take advantage of the all-inclusive, 17-room hotel's full- and half-day guided excursions—and its memorable restaurant, with a span of wall-to-wall windows showcasing the mountains beyond. On a half-day hike through the park, you'll likely see spotted guanacos, green Austral parakeets, and hawks, as well as wild orchids, Indian bread mushrooms, and wildflowers along Laguna Citines. A full-day hike deeper into the park reveals incredible views of Lake Cochrane and Argentina off in the distance. Around Lago Chico, green grass gives way to rocky ledge trails, where curious viscachas perch on rock formations framed by snow-topped mountains. Take in the view over a picnic lunch of chef-made soups and sandwiches. The picnic spot up on a promontory facing the length of the lake allows for a unique bird's-eye view of the world and time to ponder its vastness and wild wonders. +

—Hillary Richard

