Chile's Pumas & Penguins

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1	Depart London.
Day 2	Arrive Punta Arenas.
Day 3	Transfer to Torres Del Paine National Park.
Day 4/6	Torres del Paine National Park.
Day 7	Porvenir.
Day 8	Porvenir & Useless Bay.
Day 9	Punta Arenas.
Day 10	Depart Punta Arenas.
Day 11	Arrive London







From top: Puma, Torres del Paine and King Penguin.

Departs
December to April.

Dates and Prices
See website (tour code CHL03) or our brochure.

Focus
Pumas, penguins, other mammals and birds.

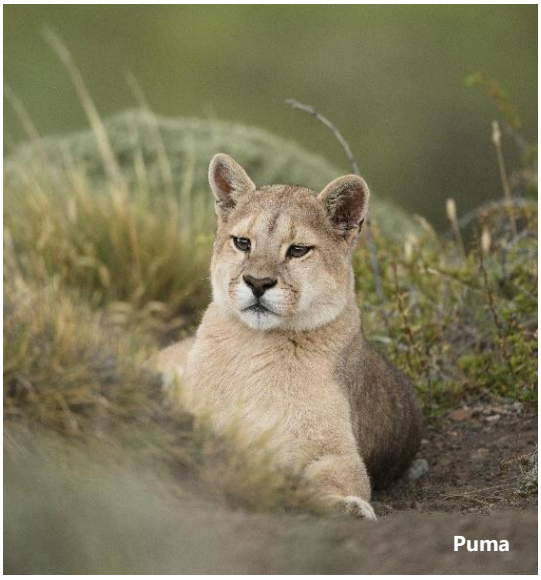
Grading
Grade B – Easy to moderately difficult (see Page 7).

Highlights
- Search for Pumas in the stunning Torres del Paine National Park.
- Enjoy flamingo-lined lakes, large herds of Guanaco and two species of fox.
- Hairy Armadillo and Hog-nosed Skunk.
- Visit the only mainland King Penguin colony at Useless Bay.
- Enjoy a boat trip along the Strait of Magellan to a colony of Magellanic Penguins (Dec – Mar).
- Led by expert local naturalist guides.

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Introduction


Puma

Like so many of our clients, Naturetrek has always had a fascination for cats, and over the years we have played an instrumental role in pioneering new tours in search of such iconic felines as Bengal and Siberian Tigers, Jaguar, Snow and Clouded Leopards and Iberian Lynx, often in some of the most remote and spectacular parts of the world. In 2012 we launched our first Puma-watching tours to the dramatic landscapes of Torres del Paine National Park in southern Chile, and over the following years this tour has gone from strength to strength. As the cats have become more habituated to people, and our guides have gained a greater understanding of their movements and behaviour, the quality of sightings has improved significantly and you now have an excellent chance of viewing these magnificent, but usually shy, felines at close range, backed by the Andes Mountains and offering wonderful photographic opportunities.


Torres del Paine

Located in one of the most beautiful regions of Patagonia, the Torres del Paine National Park has developed a reputation as the best area in the world to see Chile's apex predator, the Puma. Working alongside guides with over 25 years' experience of tracking Pumas, this tour has been specifically designed to give us the very best chance of seeing these enigmatic cats amidst a truly stunning landscape.

While Pumas will be the principal focus of this tour, the abundance of wildlife in southern Chile ensures an exciting supporting cast that includes colonies of noisy Magellanic Penguins, the only King Penguin rookery on mainland South America, huge Andean Condors, Patagonian Hog-nosed Skunk, Hairy Armadillo, herds of Guanacos and much more.

Itinerary

Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather & other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

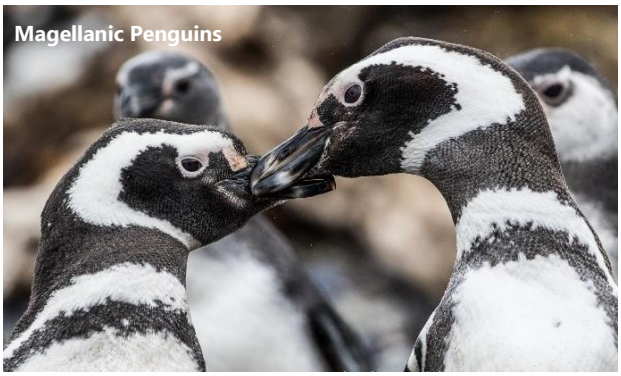
Day 1 Depart London

We fly depart London's Heathrow Airport on a LATAM Airlines flight to Punta Arenas, via São Paulo (or Madrid) and Santiago.

Day 2 Punta Arenas

It will be late afternoon/early evening before we arrive into the southern city of Punta Arenas, located to the north of The Strait of Magellan. Here we will transfer to a comfortable hotel where we have the opportunity to rest up prior to commencing our South American wildlife adventure which begins in earnest the following day.

Day 3 Torres Del Paine National Park


Magellanic Penguins

We will begin our time in southern Chile with a boat cruise (December to March only) along the Strait of Magellan to a huge penguin rookery on Magdalena Island, the summer home to over 50,000 Magellanic Penguins. As the austral autumn progresses and the breeding season draws to close, some of these birds move out to sea, but in February/March there should still be many thousands of birds present.

Our boat will leave Punta Arenas at 0730 hours for the one hour journey to Magdalena Island and its imposing cliffs. We will then have one hour to explore the island and enjoy the sight and sound of this impressive colony. A variety of other species occur around the island including Imperial and Rock Cormorants, Dolphin and Kelp Gulls, Chilean Skua and South American Tern. South American Sea Lions occasionally patrol the coast looking opportunities to catch a distracted penguin! We will leave Magdalena Island at around 0930 hours, and after a visit to the South American Sea Lion rookery on Marta Islet, we will return back to Punta Arenas. Black-browed Albatross and Southern Giant Petrel are also frequently seen on the boat rides to and from the islands.

In the afternoon we will embark on a scenic drive to Torres del Paine National Park, journeying through vast expanses of open Pampas. With a little luck we will enjoy flamingo-lined lakes and the first of many encounters with the herds of Guanaco which will be a frequent sight during this holiday. We overnight at the Hosteria Pehoe.

NB – Please note that the boat trip to Magdalena Island does not run in April or during adverse weather (which is not uncommon in southern Chile). Our April groups will spend the morning exploring along the coastline of the Strait of Magellan to the south of Punta Arenas before heading to Torres del Paine in the afternoon.

Days 4 – 6 Torres Del Paine National Park

Torres del Paine National Park is dominated by three stunning mountain peaks – the 'Towers of Paine'. Images of this wonderfully picturesque reserve illustrate many guide books to Chile and we have ample time to enjoy the spectacular scenery as well as search for the mammals and birds frequenting a range of habitats from mountain slopes and grassy plains to clear blue Andean lakes. Residents include a fine selection of Patagonian mammals, but our prime objective will be the local Pumas. Despite their relative abundance, and boosting a 100% success rate to date, it is no easy task to find such a wily predator but aided by skilled trackers/spotters we will be hoping for the ultimate reward of being able to watch a family group from a discreet distance.


Puma

We have organized a busy schedule of early morning and evening searches for Pumas in the area. We will inspect the immediate surroundings of our hotel at night, and during the day, explore their hunting grounds located in the eastern flank of the park. The area comprised by the northern coast of Sarmiento Lake, Laguna Amarga and Laguna Azul is well known for holding one of the largest concentrations of Pumas in South America.

December to April are particularly good months to attempt to find them as the females are actively hunting to provide food to their cubs and are not just active by night but also during the twilight hours.

With ample time to explore the stunning scenery, our quest for Puma is likely see us encounter a variety of other mammals and birds. In addition to ubiquitous, and often confiding herds of Guanaco we will hope to see the local Andean Deer or Huemul, Patagonian Hog-nosed Skunk and the two canid species present in the park, Chilla and Culpeo Foxes. Andean Condors are a relatively common sight here and we should get some close views of these giant birds as well as many other birding highlights that could include Silvery and White-tufted Grebes, Darwin's Rhea, Torrent Duck, Black-chested Buzzard-Eagle, Crested Caracara, Cinereous Harrier and the very impressive Magellanic Woodpecker. The latter is one of the largest of all woodpeckers and individuals are often absurdly tame responding quickly to the simple expedient of tapping a tree trunk with a piece of wood!


Guanacos


Pumas

Torres del Paine is famed for the splendour of its scenery and as we search for the Pumas we will be observing many facets of the national park. The rather misleadingly named 'Grey Lake' has a shoreline dominated by stunning blue icebergs and elsewhere stunted patches of sub-Antarctic Southern Beech forest provide shelter for such birds as the delightful little Thorn-tailed Rayadito, White-throated Tree-runner and the Austral Blackbird.

Despite the plentiful cast of distractions, they will all be secondary to our main task in Torres del Paine and our trackers will be using the latest intelligence and reports to concentrate our activities in the areas most likely to yield Puma sightings.

For our 4-night stay in Torres Del Paine we will be staying in the comfortable, but simple, Hosteria Pehoe, which sits on a small island in Lake Pehoe and commands wonderful views of the surrounding mountains.



Hosteria Pehoe

Day 7 Porvenir

Today we will take the scenic drive from Torres Del Paine to the small town of Porvenir in Tierra del Fuego. The journey will take much of the day, but we will we stop frequently to admire the landscape and enjoy the wonderful variety of birds, mammals and other wildlife we will see along the way. We will also stop at a scenic spot for a picnic lunch.

We will cross the Strait of Magellan by ferry at Primera Angostura, a journey of around 30 minutes that offers the chance of seeing a variety of seabirds and perhaps Peale's Dolphin or the rare Commerson's Dolphin. Tierra Del Fuego, the 'Land of Fire', is another landmark coined by the 16th Century navigator Ferdinand Magellan, who, on crossing the seaway that now honours him, was greeted by the sight of lines of bonfires stretching along the coastline. The fires were lit as a warning by the local Yaghan People who are believed to have inhabited



Magellanic Horned Owl

the island for over 10,000 years, but were later persecuted by western settlers. Tierra del Fuego is now a land of endless steppes, rolling hills and lush temperate forests; with isolated sheep-farming stations, known locally as 'estancias', interspersed amidst this picturesque and colourful landscape.

We will complete the drive to Porvenir and, on arrival, check into the comfortable Barlovento Hotel (or similar) for a two-night stay.

Day 8 Porvenir


King Penguins

This morning we will drive along the shores of the huge embayment of Useless Bay to the only colony of King Penguins on mainland South America. The drive will take in the region of an hour and a three quarters and we will spend the rest of the afternoon enjoying these majestic birds. 'Parque Pingüino Rey' is a private nature reserve which aims to preserve the 50 or so pairs of King Penguins that remain here year-round, taking advantage of the excellent feeding conditions in the surrounding seas. We will have ample opportunities to observe and photograph the penguins from a reasonable distance (maximum approach distance will be given by your guide and must be respected at all times), before returning to Porvenir for a second night.

Day 9 Punta Arenas

We will spend the morning looking for birds and other wildlife around Porvenir perhaps visiting the saltpans at Monumento Natural Laguna de Los Cisnes. Our return ferry is due to leave around 1300 hours and arrives back into Punta Arenas at around 1530 hours. There will be plenty of birds, and perhaps a few cetaceans, to enjoy on the crossing and there may be time for a little final birdwatching close to town before we check into our hotel for our final night in Chile.

Day 10 In flight

We depart Punta Arenas this morning for London with LATAM Airlines, via Santiago and Sao Paulo.

Day 11 London

After an overnight flight we arrive back at London's Heathrow Airport in the early afternoon.

Extensions

For those who wish to extend their stay and explore the wildlife of this exciting region further we can offer a wide choice of options, including the wildlife and scenery of the Atacama Desert and other areas of Chile.

Weather

The weather in Patagonia is very changeable, ranging from pleasantly mild to very cold, so plenty of layered clothing is essential. It is also invariably windy and thus the wind-chill factor can be high especially in exposed locations. Precipitation can occur any time and snow is not unusual later in the austral autumn.

Accommodation & Food

Accommodation will be in simple, but comfortable hotels with private facilities. All meals are included in the cost during the tour, but not in transit between flights.

Our chosen hotel for this tour, the Hosteria Pehoe, is situated in the most wonderful of locations, on a small island in Lake Pehoe with unobstructed views of the snow-capped mountains. It is a simple hotel, however, that is a little rough around the edges and, although comfortable and clean, the rooms could do with updating. As such, we hope that our group will enjoy the hotel's wonderful location but be understanding of its limitations.

Grading

This tour is graded A/B – mostly easy to moderate walking. In our quest for Pumas, we will typically spend long days in the field, often taking a packed lunch with us to allow greater flexibility with our programme. There are a number of lodges and administration centres located throughout the park and therefore we will have good access to toilet facilities if required. Finding a Puma is no easy feat and a great deal of patience will be required, but the potential rewards are enormous, with close-up sightings very possible.

A Typical Day in Torres del Paine

The exact schedule for each of our days in Torres del Paine will be at the discretion of our tour leader and influenced by factors such as the weather and recent wildlife sightings, but a typical day will usually unfold as follows.

Our Puma tracker/spotter will usually head out at around sunrise. However, as breakfast at the hotel does not begin until 0630 hours, groups typically leave the hotel at around 0700 hours. If the tracker locates a Puma earlier than that, the group may depart before breakfast and return to the hotel for a late breakfast at around 0930 hours. Typically, we search for Pumas from around 0700 hours until late morning or midday, and then again from mid-afternoon until early evening. We generally return to the hotel at around 2030 hours.

During the remainder of the day, our groups may walk selected trails or visit other areas of the park. The priority during our stay in Torres del Paine is, of course, to find and enjoy views of the Pumas, so the amount of time available for walking or exploring other parts of the park will depend on how quickly the cats are located. Some groups enjoy excellent sightings very quickly, whilst for others it can take longer. To date, our tours have maintained a 100% success rate in finding Pumas. We hope that record continues, although, as with all wildlife-watching, nothing can ever be guaranteed!

To find the Pumas, our groups remain in close contact with our tracker/spotter, whilst also searching and scanning themselves. Most of the searching is carried out from the vehicles, slowly driving the roads within the so-called 'Puma Zone' on the edge of the park, stopping regularly to get out and scan the surrounding landscape. Pumas are also occasionally encountered while walking the trails. If time permits (which is usually does), groups enjoy wildlife walks along sections of the Sarmiento, Grey Lake and Laguna Azul trails, as well as visits to the park's information centre. We try to be out on foot as much as we can, but distances in Torres Del Paine are large and so finding the Pumas, and enjoying the best of the scenery, does necessitate time in the vehicle too.

Flights

We use LATAM flights for this tour who fly to Santiago (and then onto Punta Arenas) via Sao Paulo in Brazil. British Airways also fly into Santiago direct from the UK, although they do not offer this service every day of the week. We will gladly provide a quote to fly direct with British Airways and any necessary overnights in Santiago before or after the tour. Please call 01962 733051 or email info@naturetrek.co.uk

How to book your place

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website. Please stipulate any special requirements, for example extension requests or connecting/regional flights, at the time of booking.

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