

# Wow factor

Taking on Torres del Paine's famous W Trek is no small task, but the rewards are as great as its towering mountain peaks, writes **Annie Ure**

I'd been staring down at my feet for the past hour, clambering up and over large boulders and steadying myself on slippery patches of grit. The sun was bright and the air crisp, but the low temperatures didn't bother me because I was warm from what felt like an endless climb. Eventually, the trail began to even out and, finally, I looked up.

It was my first sight of Torres del Paine – three giant granite towers that give the Patagonian national park its name. Rising dramatically from behind a shimmering turquoise lagoon, their blunt peaks soared into the cloudless sky. I felt tears on my flushed cheeks and my voice unexpectedly cracked in awe at the sight.

Rosario, my guide, put her hand on my shoulder and reassured me. "Don't worry, you're not the first person to feel emotional here," she said.

This powerful moment was the grand finale to the W Trek, one of Chilean Patagonia's most sought-after multi-day hikes. Named after the 'W' shape that it forms on a map, the 46-mile trail weaves its way through forested valleys, past glacial lakes and beneath imposing, jagged peaks in Torres del Paine National Park.

#### GROUP GOALS

Most travellers choose, as I did, to cover the distance over four days, but unlike others, I tackled the trek in April – shoulder season in Patagonia. As it was the height of autumn, I balanced the bonus of fiery foliage and quieter trails with fewer hours of daylight and lower temperatures: at night, it can fall below freezing, so woolly hats, gloves and layers were essential. ➤

Lake Pehoe, Torres del  
Paine National Park, Chile

PICTURE: Patrick O'Neill/Trepid Travel



# DESTINATIONS

LATIN AMERICA | PATAGONIA



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:

Grey Glacier and Lake Grey; hikers rest on the W Trek route; horses and hikers in Torres del Paine National Park

PICTURES: Danielle Marie Lister/Intrepid Travel; Annie Ure



## ASK THE expert

**Rosario Wevar,**  
Torres del Paine guide,  
Intrepid Travel

"September, October, March and April are seasons of transition – spring and autumn, respectively. The days get shorter, summer and vacations are over, temperatures drop, and so do the number of visitors. The fast pace slows down, making it an ideal time for those travelling for the experience, not just the destination."



I also opted for a guided tour with Intrepid Travel, which organised everything from entry permits and transfers to accommodation and meals. As well as hassle-free arrangements, I was seeking the camaraderie of being with like-minded travellers. Leading our group the entire way was local guide and park expert Rosario, offering novice hikers like me some much-needed support and reassurance, as well as fascinating insights into the region's history and geography. One of the first facts I learnt from her was that *paine* means 'blue' in Tehuelche, a critically endangered Indigenous language.

### GLACIAL WONDERS

Day one might have been our shortest hiking day with just six miles (10km) to cover, but it was our earliest start. We left our hotel in the nearest town of Puerto Natales at 6am, driving in the pitch black, until, by 8am, the morning light finally revealed the looming mountains of Torres del Paine across the plains.

After entering the park, we boarded a catamaran that carried us across Lake Grey. The water's murky, bluish-grey colour is from melted particles of Grey Glacier, our starting point for the trek. After getting off the boat, it didn't take long to reach our first viewpoint of the magnificent landscape: a chance to gaze at the glacier's towering blue ice cliffs that can reach up to 30 metres high. Giant icebergs floated in the water in front of the glacier, evidence of past calving events. We'd barely taken our first steps and I'd already had my first 'wow' moment.

Following a breezy five-hour hike along the shoreline of Lake Grey, we reached our first night's accommodation. Dotted along the trail are several large shelters called *refugios*, where hikers can refuel and rest for the night – usually bunking with around six people in a room. This first *refugio* had communal areas with log-burning stoves, offering us space to socialise and share a game or two of Uno, before heading to the dining hall for a warming buffet dinner with soups, pasta and chicken dishes.

### IN AWE OF AUTUMN

My quads were put to the test on the second day: after setting off under a glowing pink sky, we headed for French Valley – what would be the centre of the 'W' on a map. The day's lengthy 15-mile section had a series of tricky inclines along uneven boulder paths, with autumn leaves fluttering down on us like confetti. However, it was all worthwhile when we emerged out of the forests to Mirador Frances – our lunch spot.

Here, I could appreciate how the valley's forest of native lenga trees created a mosaic of red, yellow and orange, sweeping all the way down towards the turquoise water of Nordenskjöld Lake. To the east were the charcoal-black 'horns' of Cuernos del Paine, another one of the park's recognisable landmarks. On the opposite side of the valley was Cerro Paine Grande, the highest mountain in the park: its distant rumbling avalanches stunned us into silence as we munched on our sandwiches. ➤

# DESTINATIONS

## LATIN AMERICA | PATAGONIA

DO & DON'T



**DO** tell clients about the benefits of shoulder-season trekking to enjoy less-crowded trails and a higher chance of spotting wildlife. For Patagonia, this is October–November (spring) and March–April (autumn).

**DO** inform clients they will need a good level of fitness and are required to carry their personal belongings, including clothing, food and water, as there is no porter service. However, multi-day hiking experience and altitude training is not essential.



**DON'T** promise perfect weather, even if booking in high season (December–February). Weather is very unpredictable in Patagonia, and clients are encouraged to read Intrepid's packing list carefully before travelling.

**DON'T** sell it as a high-end experience. This W Trek itinerary is best suited to adventure-loving customers who are happy with basic food and accommodation – including sharing mixed dorms and camping.



**ABOVE:** Hikers on the W Trek can explore the region's glaciers **PICTURES:** Intrepid Travel/Steve Mortimer, Marci; Shutterstock/Strilets

We'd found our rhythm by day three. After a night of comfy camping in raised, mattress-bottomed tents, we set off on a more relaxed 10-mile ramble along the shores of Nordenskjöld Lake, although there were still plenty of small ascents and descents to keep us focused. On top of a hill, Rosario picked a giant boulder with views out across the lake for our lunch break.

"In January and February, it can be too windy to eat here. Although it's high season, it's also known as windy season," she told us, as we smugly enjoyed another blissful day in the sun, offering yet another reason why shoulder season can be a great time to hike the W Trek.

Once settled into our new *refugio* for the final night, I took a moment outside to appreciate the clear night sky, with full moon and bright constellations illuminating the park's glowing, snow-topped peaks. Good weather is never guaranteed in Torres del Paine whatever time of year you visit, so I thanked my lucky stars and wished for one more glorious day.

### THE LAST HURRAH

Our luck held – and not just with the weather, which took a warmer turn after we woke to sub-zero temperatures. Shortly after departure on our final trekking day, we noticed a puma across the steppe, stalking a hare through the long grass. Although the park is home to the world's highest concentration of the big cat, sightings remain rare. This one lingered just long enough for our group to snap some photos before it slipped away in pursuit of its prey. "You're very lucky," Rosario said. "They don't always make an appearance."

The final 13-mile section proved to be the most challenging of the trek so far, but this is when you benefit from hiking in a group, keeping each other motivated when times got tough.

Following the trail through Valley Ascencio alongside a glistening river, we traversed steep mountain paths, crossed wooden-slat bridges and climbed switchbacks under the forest's dazzling golden canopy. It was the busiest trail so far, with day-trippers also coming to see the famous towers – yet Rosario pointed out there were still fewer than half the people you'd see in high season.

There's no feeling that compares with seeing Torres del Paine for the first time. Sitting at 1,100 metres above sea level, with a bold blue sky as a backdrop and distant condors swooping around their peaks, the granite giants will remain etched in my memory, alongside the other enchanting landscapes and wild surprises we'd seen throughout our journey. The trek may get its name from the shape of the route, but in my mind 'W' will always stand for 'wow'. **TW**

### BOOK IT

**Intrepid Travel's** six-day Patagonia: Torres del Paine Classic W Trek starts at £1,976, including two hotel nights in Puerto Natales at the start and end of the trip, plus three nights in *refugios* or full-service camping, plus meals, transport, boat trips and park permits. The price for a December 6 departure, including flights from Heathrow to Puerto Natales (two stops), costs from £3,560. [intrepidtravel.com/uk](http://intrepidtravel.com/uk)