

Southbound, With Unexpected Detours Leading to Unforgettable Places

We left Santiago energized, heading south, and inching closer to one of the parts of the journey we had been anticipating the most: Patagonia, and more specifically, the Carretera Austral. Why the Carretera Austral? This is the kind of place we imagine to be a long wandering path into the wilderness – remote, not very populated, one of those rare roads that may still feel mostly untouched, where all that matters is nature, not civilization. We picture narrow and windy stretches of unpaved terrain and scenery that wants you to slow down to absorb the beauty of the landscapes. We expect to see tall mountains, glaciers, rivers cutting through forest, and the ocean by our side. We also anticipate many ferry crossings, some longer than others, and some that will require planning, which we have already come across!

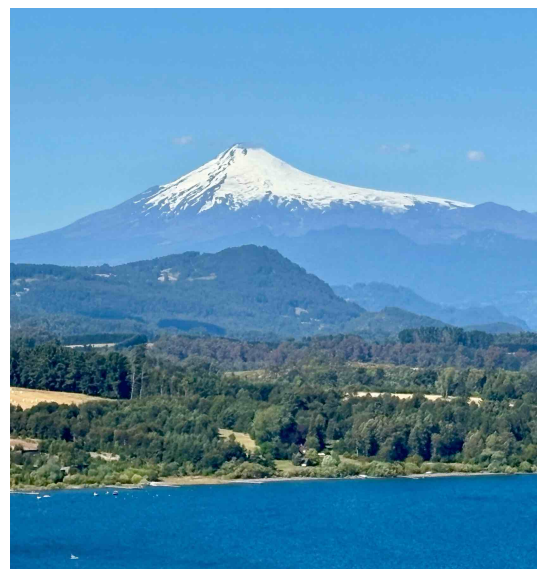
Our original plan was to start in Puerto Montt, drive south to Yungay, take the 42-hour-long ferry down to Puerto Natales, continue to Ushuaia, and then loop back north to complete the remaining stretches of the Carretera Austral. We knew ferry tickets needed to be purchased in advance. What we didn't realize was *how* far in advance.

By the time we tried to secure tickets in early January for a sailing date in February, we were out of luck – the next available ferry wasn't until mid-March! Well, that simply wouldn't work. Our aim was to be in Ushuaia by mid-February to coincide with the middle of the summer. So, once again, we adjusted. Instead of taking that ferry southbound, we decided we would eventually take it northbound and promptly made that reservation.



Before reaching Puerto Montt, we broke up the drive with a couple of nights of camping. The first night, we aimed for a national park but arrived too late. The gates were already closed. That is something else we have learned, many of the National Parks in Chile require reservations in advance. So, we took this opportunity to find a quiet spot in the forest nearby and set up a wild camp. It became our first real Patagonian-style night in Chile. It was simple, quiet, and surrounded by trees. It was just a perfect!

The following day, we made our way toward the *Circuito de los Siete Lagos*, the Circuit of the Seven Lakes, a region known for its lakes – seven in case you are wondering – forests, and volcanoes. Another curious note about Chile: all of the roads, even in the cities, are part of a “circuit,” do you remember the dessert circuit? And the pisco circuit? Anyway, we camped by one of the lakes with a clear view of Volcán Villarica.



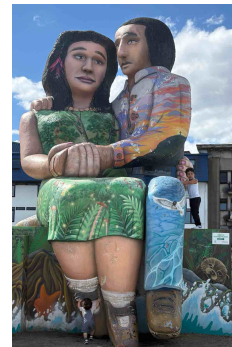


This area was much busier than previous stops, so we stayed in an established campground rather than wild camping. That decision led to one of the most unexpected luxuries of the trip: a wood-fired hot tub. At first, we doubted it would ever get hot enough. Then the fire did its work. Soaking there at night, surrounded by trees, the mountain air and the stars, felt like an indulgence.

The next morning, we met a local Chilean man camping nearby. Curious about our Taco Libre, he struck up a conversation, eager to practice his English. We talked about Florida, hurricanes, earthquakes, and life in southern Chile. He explained how common seismic activity is in this region and mentioned that people can feel tremors from Villarrica. Hearing that while seeing the volcano reminded us that this land is alive and that nature always finds ways to never let you forget it.

Eventually, we reached Puerto Montt, the official starting point of the Carretera Austral, or Ruta 7. We spent several days there preparing for the big adventure. This would be our last real opportunity to stock up before heading into a region where towns, stores, and restaurants become increasingly scarce. We loaded the car with dry food, canned goods, rice, pasta, and protein bars. The goal was to be self-sufficient for at least two weeks.

While in Puerto Montt, we walked along the waterfront and stopped by the *Mirando al Mar* – Looking at the Sea – statue. We treated ourselves to a really good meal at a nice restaurant, a conscious goodbye to restaurant meals and the convenience of civilization, knowing that for a while, we would need to get creative with the meals and menus that our own Taco Libre would provide.



Our next move depended on a ferry. And again, the ferry we needed to take to Hornopirén wasn't available for several days. Suddenly, we had time, and days to fill. Instead of getting upset with the setback, we decided to find alternatives to those extra days.

This “mishap” led us to the island of Gran Chiloé. This place was never part of the original plan, and yet, it became an incredible memorable detour of the journey, in part because of its beauty, but also because of the subtle message from life that we were exactly where we were supposed to be. From the very beginning, everything worked like clockwork – unplanned but better than if it had been. As soon as we arrived at the ferry terminal, without reservations, we drove straight on board, no waiting, no delays. Moments later, we were moving. It was our first ferry crossing in South America, and it felt symbolic.

We headed to La Pingüinera, one of the few places in the world where Humboldt and Magellanic penguins coexist, located in the town of Puñihuil. As luck would have it, January is an ideal time to

see them, as chicks are hatching. We looked around and found a cabin close to where you board the small boats to see the penguins. We contacted the owner through WhatsApp to find out cost and availability. We were told the price for the small cabin, with the caveat, it didn't have internet or TV. Well, we didn't care about that, because we do not watch that much TV and we have Starlink, so we told her we would take it! She asked for us to drive into the grounds, and someone would meet us shortly. Sure enough, within a few minutes her daughter arrived apologizing because the small cabin was not available – it still needed to be cleaned – so if okay with us, we could stay in one of the large ones for the same price! We, of course, did not debate the alternative and took it. Turns out, that we not only had the bigger cabin, but also the one with the best view. We could see the penguins from our cabin AND dolphins!! We were in heaven – it felt so unreal. Be sure to check out our YouTube video, Pinguilandia.



We went to the beach and made a reservation for the last penguin tour, as we learned that later in the day is best, which is when the “family is together” given that during the day some of the penguins are out in the ocean searching for food. We saw four colonies of penguins, both the Humboldt and Magellanic. The easiest way to tell them apart is by looking at their chests: Humboldt penguins have a single black band, while Magellanic penguins have two, and are larger in size. After seeing the adult penguins and babies up close, we went back to our cabin only to find the woman's husband waiting for us at our doorsteps to get a fire started! It truly felt like first class accommodation. We enjoyed the rest of the evening by the fireplace grateful for the day's unplanned adventures.

After such incredible experience at Puñihuil, we decided to explore more of the island itself. Gran Chiloé is known for its colorful wooden churches. In fact, the UNESCO has recognized them for their cultural significance – they represent a unique fusion of indigenous and European building traditions. But we quickly realized the island is not just about wooden churches. Everything is wooden and colorful: houses, fences, benches, even boats! Different styles of wooden shingles looked like a collage of scales, and in bright varied colors. We started thinking of Gran Chiloé as the colorful wooden island. Yes, Gran Chiloé is also part of a circuit, the Circuito de las Iglesias – the *Circuit of the Churches*. We would rename it el Circuito de la Madera Colorida, the *Circuit of Colorful Wood*!



As we drove through Gran Chiloé, we tried to think of ways to describe its scenery. Each place is unique, special, and doesn't deserve to be compared to others. But sometimes comparisons help frame a feeling. For us, the rolling hills and layered greens resembled the Colombian mountains, especially around Boyacá and la Sabana de Bogotá, with mountains that look like a Persian rug of patches of greens and browns. The dark blue ocean with its clouds and the distant mountains, resembled the feeling of the Pacific Northwest. Not that Chiloé is either place, but standing there, it felt like those two worlds had come together and were overlapping.



While in the island, we also visited Hito Cero, which is the mile marker for kilometer zero (or mile zero) of the Pan-American Highway. A simple marker, but a great one! It is the marker down south where the road that crosses the entire American continent, "the PanAm," begins. Its pavement unites more than miles: it connects the various cultures, the unique ways of life, the intricacies of each country, and despite all the differences, big and small, that same road has something in common: the feeling of awe and adventure.

Gran Chiloé was a detour born entirely from unavailable ferry tickets. And yet, it became a reminder of why we chose this way of traveling in the first place: not having everything planned gives space for discovery, for pauses that turn into highlights, and for places you never knew you needed to see.

Next... the Carretera Austral!

January 18, 2026

