

# Just the tip of the icefield

MARJIE COURTIS explores the back roads to the magnificent Los Glaciares National Park at a leisurely pace

About 200,000 people visit Argentina's Perito Moreno Glacier each year, many of them taking the three-and-a-half-hour flight from Buenos Aires to the nearest town of El Calafate, only to stay a couple of days.

Though beautiful and accessible, Perito Moreno Glacier is only one of many glaciers in the Los Glaciares National Park, and there are many more attractions. The park, which is World Heritage-listed and near Argentina's border with Chile, is in the Southern Patagonian province of Santa Cruz. It covers more than 726,000ha, a considerable portion of which is covered by the Patagonian Icefield, one of the largest expanses of ice in the world.

Los Glaciares National Park is in the Patagonian Andes and even though the icefield itself is really suitable only for serious icetrekking and climbers, it influences everything you experience as it's the source of many of the national park's glaciers. The glaciers in turn feed the voluminous lakes and rivers.

You can guide yourself in many areas of the park but, if you prefer, qualified guides are available from El Chalten and El Calafate, for a range of activities — you can take part in traditional treks, ice treks and icefield expeditions, visits to petrified forests, climbing, camping, birdwatching, boating, fishing, horseriding and mountain biking.

I took a path of self-discovery as much as possible, as this is a vast national park, with unexpected discoveries off the main tourist trail. Rather than base myself in El Calafate, close to Perito Moreno Glacier, I spent most of my nights in the village of El Chalten, three hours away by bus. It is a quieter place to stay, friendlier for the independent traveller and has the best access to self-guided walks. And it's a place



Los Glaciares National Park

where there is a great sense of camaraderie, both on the trails and in the town.

Nevertheless, I wasn't going to miss the Perito Moreno Glacier. From El Calafate, I took the "Tour Alternativo", which took the back roads to the glacier at a leisurely pace. There was time to stop and watch a crested caracara, a member of the falcon family, scanning the horizon for potential prey from the top of a calafate bush, a box-leaved barberry. The bus visited a small ranch, or estancia, too. It was a little touristy but provided some insight into ranch life, with a few modern-day gauchos, a herd of goats and lamb cooking, Argentine-style, in an open fireplace.

The tour organisers had permission for us to walk along one side of an arm of Lago Argentino, facing the south face of Perito Moreno Glacier. The wind howled around our parkas and icebergs were dotted close to the pebbly shore, but there was just our small busload of people there. Chilean flame trees lit up the foreshore and we saw the Perito Moreno glistening further along the lake.

Only after this walk did we join the hundreds of other visitors on the viewing platforms to see both the north and south faces of the glacier, and the more distant glacial flow



Glacier viewing platforms.



The jagged surface of Perito Moreno Glacier. Pictures: Marjie Courtis



Llamas work as beasts of burden.

behind them. Majestic blue hues contrast with the white — and occasionally dirty-brown — ice, with its jagged pinnacles and ridges.

We had the choice of taking a boat to get even closer — and even colder. The Argentine flag, flapping vigorously in the cold wind, almost perfectly matched the blue and white backdrop of the glacier's south face.

El Chalten, 200km from El Calafate, is known as the trekking capital of Patagonia, although its origins are political rather than pedestrian. Founded in the 1980s to help secure the disputed border with Chile, El Chalten appears to have grown in a topsy-turvy fashion but is a very relaxed base to spend a few days. There's a variety of places to stay and camping is an option.

My prearranged mini-bus ride with Las Lengas transport from El Calafate to El Chalten passed majestic rocky outcrops, meandering glacial-blue river and Lago Viedma, a large lake with scattered icebergs from the Viedma Glacier.

It was sparse country but we saw condors soaring above, and guanacos, members of the llama family, grazing on the steppe.

To avoid the crowds, I chose November — just before the summer peak season — to visit the national park. The downside was there were days of low visibility and cold, windy weather with snow flurries and icy ground. The national parks office provided good advice, though, including maps with good baseline

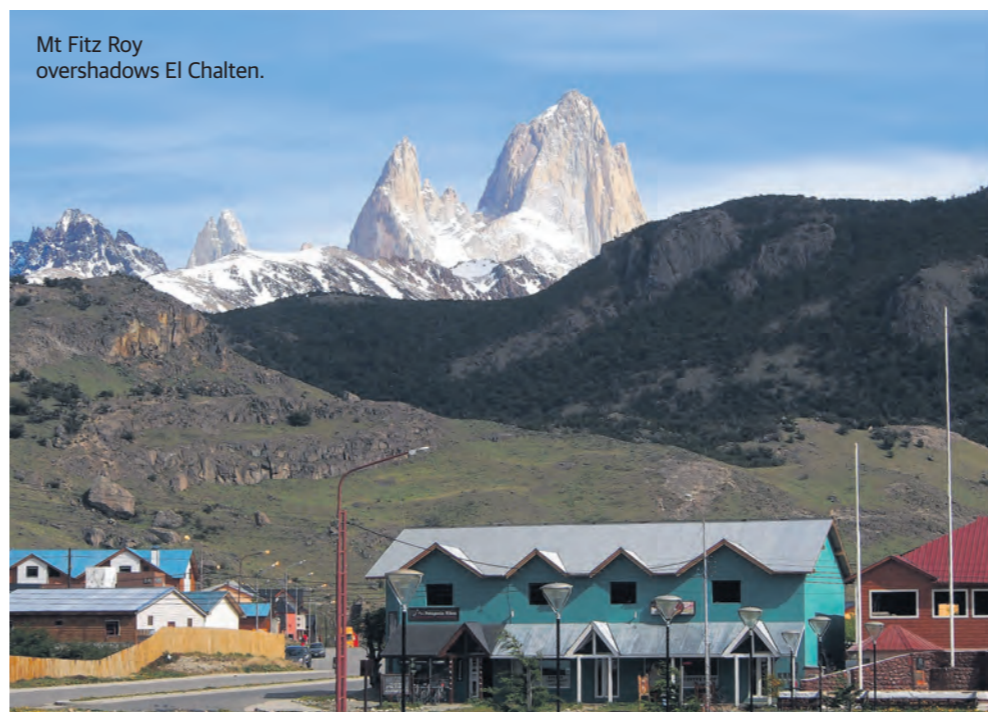
information about each trek, describing the length, number of metres to be climbed and an estimate of time required in fine weather.

I made my first all-day trek to Laguna Torre, 11km, or three hours away. It was a cold trek and light snow was falling, but there were a number of delightful distractions, such as the green murtilla bushes showing off their purple berries against the whiteness of the snow, and the yellow flowers of calafate bush pushing up between the rocks. And when I came across a red-crested Magellanic woodpecker, I was so close that small wood chips flew at me as it pecked for insects. Llamas passed at one stage, carrying camping gear for overnight trekkers.

There was a 230m climb at the end of the track to an exposed ridge with a view of Lago Torre. You could walk down to the lake's icy cold edge but alas, as expected, the mountain of Cerro Torre was completely clouded and misted in.

The weather changes rapidly in the national park and by the next day I could see Cerro Torre and Mt Fitz Roy from my hotel, both awesome, granitic-pink mountains that were so sheer in places their ice cover had slipped and exposed the rock.

Saving my energy for the 12.5km walk and 750m climb to see Laguna de los Tres, I took my hotel manager's advice and started my journey slightly north of the national park from Hosteria El Pilar, which she said would be much flatter than



Mt Fitz Roy overshadows El Chalten.

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the track out of town.

It was a blissful walk, with butterflies flitting among the moss and snow-covered trees. I was so focused on Mt Fitz Roy ahead that when, with no fanfare and no expectations, I came across the Piedras Blancas glacier across the valley, I felt as though I had the beautiful blue hues of its icy surface to myself. I heard the roar of avalanching snow or ice from that direction echoing through the valley.

That afternoon I had snow, ice and rocks to contend with on the narrow trail to the top, and a steady stream of trekkers coming down the same trail. And while it wasn't all plain trekking, it was so satisfying to reach the top to view Laguna de los Tres, white with ice against the pink granite of Mt Fitz Roy which loomed above it. On the descent, there were more magnificent views of some of the park's bright blue lakes.

And there's charm around, too. Found objects around El Chalten

have been recycled as street art in the form of little tin figures of skiers, trekkers and cyclists. Each one incorporates a litter bin, the community's response to keeping litter off the ground.

El Calafate is full of quaint little wooden buildings housing shops, restaurants and museums. And in between the two places is La Leona, an old hotel once visited by Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid on their run from the law in the US.

If you visit Argentina, you must go to Los Glaciares National Park. And remember that the Perito Moreno Glacier is only the tip of the icefield.

## fact file

- Aerolineas Argentinas and LAN Airlines operate domestic flights to El Calafate. [aerolineas.com.ar](http://aerolineas.com.ar) or [lan.com](http://lan.com).
- Las Lengas Transport and TAQSA operate bus services to El Chalten. [transportelalengas.com](http://transportelalengas.com) and [taqsa.com.ar](http://taqsa.com.ar).
- Hostel del Glaciar Libertador in El Calafate runs the Tour Alternativo. [glaciar.com](http://glaciar.com).

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