

Wild cat COUNTRY

Already lauded for its ruggedly beautiful landscapes, Chilean Patagonia is attracting a new breed of traveller hoping to spot the area’s once-elusive pumas, writes Sarah Reid.

With my gaze lowered against an assault of icy Patagonian rain, it takes me a minute to notice the couple ahead of me on the trail, pointing into the misty valley sloping away from our route. Maybe some guanacos, I surmise, scanning the scrubland for the llama relatives. Then I see it: a puma – also known as a cougar or mountain lion – casually grooming its tawny coat with rhythmic strokes of its pink tongue. It knows we’re here but, to my relief, doesn’t appear to care. Tracing the foothills of the snow-laced Paine massif in southern Chile’s Torres del Paine National Park, the W Trek is one of the world’s most famous multi-day hikes. Walkers are immersed in a surreal sub-polar wilderness where glaciers seep into turquoise lakes and ancient forests creep along hidden gorges. And if you’ve seen *Our Great National Parks*, the Emmy-winning Netflix docuseries presented by Barack Obama, you’ll know this spectacular setting may also proffer a memorable wildlife encounter. For as vast areas of Chilean Patagonia are rewilded, narrates the former US president, wild pumas have rebounded. And it’s now easier than ever to admire them in their natural habitat.

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A walk on the wild side

Around 100 adult pumas are currently thought to roam Torres del Paine, and while sightings on the W Trek in the heart of the 242,242-hectare national park are increasing, the wild cats are more commonly spotted in the wildlife-rich grasslands east of the trail.

Dedicated to supporting a sustainable future for Patagonia, Chile Nativo is one of several local operators that have recently launched puma tracking tours in this area of the park. With two guides – including French-born Tim Connelly, who was involved with the Netflix series – and expert local puma tracker Jose ‘Wayaja Puma’ Vargas leading our walking safari, I’m quietly confident we won’t be left disappointed.

From the huge paw prints in the dirt to the tangles of guanaco bones littering the landscape, the presence of pumas is everywhere on the Aonikenk Trail, which can only be accessed with a certified guide. Hiking into prime puma territory is an unnerving experience, but Tim assures us that no attacks have been recorded in the park, at least in modern history. With 300,000 visitors passing through its gates annually, the wild cats have become accustomed to our presence. Finally, we hear it: a series of bird-like trills – the alarm call of a guanaco. Its ambush foiled, a large puma, then another, emerge from their hiding places not far from the trail and skulk off around a ridge and out of sight. Jose later leads us by car to a trio of pumas dozing near the road. Observing one-eyed Blinka tenderly nuzzling her two cubs from a safe distance, it’s difficult to comprehend that hunting pumas, outlawed since the 1980s, still continues in these lands.

Conservation safari

“Pumas have historically been the enemy of local sheep farmers,” explains local guide Gonzalo Vargas as we pile into a Land Cruiser at Estancia Cerro Guido, one of the largest working *estancias* (ranches) surrounding Torres del Paine. While some local farmers still view pumas as a pest, Cerro Guido is the latest in a string of *estancias* to embrace the puma boom as an opportunity to future-proof its operations with the help of tourism.

01 Pumas from the Netflix series ‘Our Great National Parks’ © Netflix 02 & 03 Estancia Cerro Guido 04 The stunning sights of Patagonia © Kurt Cotoaga/Unsplash 05 Puma sightings are increasing in this region © Chile Nativo Travel



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03



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Travel file

Getting there

Qantas flies direct from Sydney to Santiago, with connections to Puerto Natales.

Puma tracking

chilenativo.travel
estanciacerroguido.com

Information

patagonia-chile.com

“If we don’t adapt, ranches like this will disappear, and the [ranching] culture will disappear with them,” Gonzalo says sombrely. Last year, the estancia launched the Cerro Guido Conservation Foundation (CGCF) focused on developing methods for livestock farming to sustainably coexist with the region’s biodiversity. And visitors can now experience its work on two new day tours helping to fund it.

Both excursions begin with a 4WD adventure across the property to review camera-trap footage before learning about another predation mitigation strategy: the introduction of huge maremma sheepdogs traditionally used in Italy to repel wolves.

Along the way we pause to admire a gaggle of coral-pink flamingos preening in a lake backdropped by the iconic three-pronged *torres* (towers) of the Paine massif. Alas, the closest we get to spotting a puma is a recent meal, the bloodied rib cage of a slaughtered sheep glistening in the midday sun. Yet there are no complaints when it’s time to return to the homestead for a Patagonian lamb *asado* (barbecue).

After lunch, the Wildlife and Heritage experience focuses on life on the estancia, while the Conservation Safari transports participants to the Casa Puma, the CGCF operations centre. Here staff lead a sunset field trip to showcase their research – and their tracking skills.

With elegantly refurbished guestrooms also opened in 2022, Cerro Guido is an ideal base to explore Torres del Paine, a 90-minute drive from the gateway city of Puerto Natales. But you don’t need to leave its glass-walled restaurant to savour a classic Patagonian experience (aside from the life-affirming lamb). The rumble of hooves announces the arrival of a *gaucho* looking every part the Chilean Patagonian stockman with his thick wool beret and battered leather boots. It’s a scene that crystallises the significance of the CGCF’s dual goal to protect not just the wildlife but also the agricultural traditions that make this faraway corner of the planet so special. And I’m here for it. ♦