

BREATHE DEEPLY

A seldom-followed path through the Chilean Lake District gives **Dan Slater** the opportunity to find himself alone.

Gulde Mauricio watches over the drowned forest near the Alerces mountain cabin.



The pier on Lake Tagua Tagua.

It's dawn and I'm surrounded by the sheer walls of a granite cirque at the top of a remote valley. The crowns of the peaks, lightly dusted with snow and stark against the blue sky, have just caught the first rays of the rising sun and are glowing orange, the whole magnificent light show reflected in the still pools of the surrounding marsh land. The rocks exude warmth I can't share, for here, at the foot of the cliffs, the sun is still half an hour away. Amazingly, in a country receiving up to four million tourists a year, there are no stalls selling forgettable souvenirs, no children running and shouting, and absolutely no grinning youths taking selfies. I'm completely alone.

Faced with the array of wonders Chile boasts, it's surprising most tourists stick to the same three points of a scalene triangle: the soaring towers of the southern Patagonian Andes, the arid desert around San Pedro de Atacama and the eerie isolation of Rapa Nui (Easter Island). They're all magnificent locations, to be sure, yet barely scratch the surface of a country more than 4000 kilometres long. Probably the fourth most popular area in Chile is the Lake District, a land of volcanoes, water, mountains and national parks that clusters at the northern end of Patagonia and flows across the border into Argentina. While some parts can be busy, others are just ripe for exploration – one of these is Parque Tagua Tagua.

Located at a wide spot in the Puelo River, southeast of the main bulk of the Lake District, this 3000-hectare private reserve has managed to remain unspoiled due in part to its protective geography. Comprising the entirety of a hanging valley carved by the passage of an ancient glacier, Tagua Tagua is shielded by high ridges either side and culminates in a 30-metre waterfall that crashes ferociously into the Puelo, creating a fearsome natural barrier that keeps away all but the most curious of explorers.

Of course, the valley wouldn't have remained unknown if it weren't also remote. From the regional hub of Puerto Varas we'd driven for hours

through farmland towards the Reloncaví Estuary, the first finger of a fjord system that runs all the way to Ushuaia, the southernmost city in the world. Leaving bitumen behind, we wound around forested mountains that disappeared into the clouds and through small rainswept settlements. The gravel terminated at a great body of water, Lago Tagua Tagua, where a few forlorn vehicles waited for the car ferry to take them to the continuation of the road south.

A 10-minute boat ride from the dock brought me to my accommodation on the shore of the lake directly opposite the entrance to Parque Tagua Tagua. Mítico Puelo Lodge is a fabulous wooden building in the style of an Alaskan fishing lodge, constructed in 1989 by a rich American fly-fishing enthusiast. Back then there were neither roads nor ferries and all guests were flown in by helicopter. Yet despite hosting high-profile Republican Party politicians and prestigious clients such as Bob Dylan and Robert Redford, the lodge only operated for three years.

"The owner's son-in-law was in charge of operating the lodge, but imagine a young man from North America who likes to party, has a few million dollars in his pocket and his family very far away," says Rodrigo Condeza, the current manager. "That combination was kind of bad. Two helicopters crashed, one of the boats capsized and one of the aeroplanes went into the lake. Here in Patagonia, unlike Alaska, it is really windy and



Hiking through Valdivian rainforest.



On the way to the cabin.

you have to know how to fly among these mountains. I think they didn't have this kind of experience."

The lodge is now Chilean owned and in its third full season as Mítico Puelo. "This is a refuge," explains Rodrigo. "It is not fancy, but simple and practical. Our focus is outside. For us the luxury is in the forest, the trees, the mountains and the water. Clients must not think this is a hotel or resort and stay inside the whole time. That is not the idea."

While there are plenty of outdoor activities offered around the lake, including fly fishing, mountain biking and kayaking, I'm here strictly for the hiking. My guide is Mauricio, a softly spoken local guy who has been working here for three years and obviously loves taking clients into Parque Tagua Tagua. A short boat ride across the lake takes us to the pounding waterfall, beyond which the valley zigzags steeply up through the forest and into the mountains, stern and craggy behind a veil of cloud.

When the boat has dropped us on bare rock, just out of the spray of the falls, Mauricio leads me up a steep but short path to the ranger station where everyone must register their trip. According to the records, the park had just 843 visitors in 2015.

The single walking track runs 10 kilometres up to the head of the valley, not counting a few side-trips to see waterfalls, where we'll be staying overnight in a purpose-built hut furnished with bunks and a wood-burning stove. While Mauricio carries a sizeable rucksack with all our food, I require only a light daypack.

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Behind the ranger station is an area of fruit trees planted by a Mapuche family who lived here 90 years ago. Grapes, apples and citrus fruit lie on the ground around a tumbledown wooden shack, still standing but choked with weeds and brambles. Leaving this last trace of habitation behind, we work our way slowly and steadily, along tracks and over basic, well-made bridges, through the evergreen Valdivian rainforest that dominates the lower half of the valley. Two days of much-needed rain have left the park as lush as a cloud forest – an explosion of ferns, mosses and lichens – and the gushing Rio Tagua Tagua is startlingly clear. "Breathe deeply," reads a sign in Spanish at the side of the track. "You are entering a pristine area."

There is plenty of wildlife living in the valley, from numerous species of bird and frog to big-ticket mammals like the puma and the southern pudú, the world's smallest deer. Sadly, we aren't lucky enough to spot either of these, although the only other hikers we encounter, a couple on their way back to the lodge, claim to have seen a puma footprint in the mud. The most exciting fauna we spy are chucao, small orange-breasted birds that scratch around in the dirt like chickens looking for insects to eat. Mauricio knows his stuff though, frequently pointing out small leaves and berries with scarcely believable enthusiasm. "This is one of my favourite plants," he whispers. "Look at the way the leaves spread. And this one, this is super interesting. It is a member of the tomato family!"

After about three-and-a-half hours we reach the first of the two cabins in the park, Refugio Alerces, which overlooks a small lake complete with spectacular drowned forest. It's a perfect place for lunch, although it soon gets chilly and we pull on our insulated jackets, Mauricio taking in added warmth from his ever-present gourd of *yerba mate*, the traditional

Refugio Alerces

hot drink of half of South America. “Most hikers come only to Refugio Alerces,” he tells me as he tidies up the hut, clearly pleased that we will be going further today. It is obvious he cares for this place, which isn’t entirely surprising since he spent three months here last year as the summer caretaker.

It’s a beautiful spot, but sees little sun and I’m happy to get going again. Just above the hut the foliage changes abruptly to Andean Patagonian forest, indicated by the presence of larch and beech trees, known in Spanish as

our breath dissipate. Dinner is delicious roast pork and fried potatoes pre-prepared by the chef at the lodge. The fact there is just the two of us is most appreciated at bedtime when we pile up all the foam mattresses to make comfy nests.

Rodrigo has grand plans for Parque Tagua Tagua, currently in the fifth of a 25-year concession from the government. “We manage the conservation and tourism for now, but we are working to protect the land in the future,” he tells me. “We are trying to emulate Douglas

GET PLANNING



GET THERE

LATAM Airlines operates a number of services each week between Sydney and Santiago, the capital of Chile (some have a stopover in Auckland), with onward connections to Puerto Montt, the closest airport to Parque Tagua Tagua. Return fares cost about AU\$2200, although, depending on when you book, special fares can be considerably cheaper.

latam.com



TOUR THERE

Forward Travel offers four-night trips to Chile’s Parque Tagua Tagua, staying at Mítico Puelo Lodge for three nights and Quetrus mountain refuge for one night. Prices start at AU\$2230 a person for two people, including return transfers from Puerto Montt, accommodation, meals and drinks, guided excursions, park entrance and hiking guide. The company can also organise other trips in Chile and South America.

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As the sun drops so does the temperature. Mauricio expertly coaxes the stove to life and we huddle around it watching our breath dissipate.

alerce and *coihue* respectively. Refugio Quetrus is another couple of hours’ walk uphill. Named for a pair of steamer ducks, or *quetrus*, that nest on the lake there, it may lack the eerie, semi-submerged trees of Refugio Alerces but its panoramic backdrop of the cirque at the head of the valley is no less spectacular. The granite cliffs have hidden the afternoon sun, but there is still plenty of time to admire the view and explore the network of paths around the lake, spotting birdlife as we walk.

Refugio Quetrus is, shall we say, rustic. Alerce trees provide strong, waterproof timber that makes excellent building material, and the two-storey shelter is solid yet bleak in its austerity. Books and games provide homely touches and no doubt a larger group would bring the hut to life. As the sun drops so does the temperature. Mauricio expertly coaxes the stove to life and we huddle around it watching

Tompkins [multi-millionaire philanthropist and owner of the North Face, who died late last year while sea kayaking in Patagonia] by buying land and inviting the government to put more into conservation and national parks. If everything goes well, in 20 or 30 more years we will have protected a quarter of the Puelo Valley as a biosphere reserve that co-exists with tourism, local communities and agriculture.” It’s a bold plan, and one that should be applauded and supported.

The following morning I am up early. With Mauricio still snoozing in the hut, I have the entire cirque to myself. Dawn mist threads through the tall stands of coihue trees and reflects the sun. With 1300 visitors to the park this season, Tagua Tagua is still a little-known secret, but time and the efforts of Rodrigo Condeza will ensure that it doesn’t stay this way for long.



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