

La Araucanía & the Lakes District



Here – in the states of La Araucanía and the Lakes District – begins the great Chilean south. Named after the ubiquitous monkey-puzzle tree and the lakes that dot the landscape, these states are home to glacier-tipped volcanic cones, old-growth forests and the indomitable Mapuche people. While the air is fresher, the trees greener and the lakes bluer, it is not as rugged or as challenging as Patagonia in the deeper south – think of it as Patagonia Lite. The region has moderate weather, a wealth of conveniences and services for the traveler and regular, easy transportation. It is one of the safest places to travel in Latin America. Your highest risks are in the various outdoor sports that beckon the adventurous spirit, including hiking, skiing, climbing, kayaking, horseback riding, rafting, canyoning and canyoning. For those in search of relaxation there are also luxurious lakeside retreats, hot springs, casinos and beaches (although going to the beach in winter counts as an adventure sport). And, to top it off, the region also boasts the best beer south of Mexico: Valdivia's own Kunstmann.

Half of the population lives in the countryside, but the other half is packed into growing cities like Temuco, Valdivia, Osorno and Puerto Montt. The cities, save Valdivia, are not overly attractive, and are mainly transportation hubs and workaday towns that sprawl outwards in a mesh of soggy concrete architecture. The true beauty of the region is in the hamlets that line the lakes and mountains and in the assorted national parks and nature reserves.

As a visitor you can take it slow and while away a week or a season by the lakeside, or you can skip from town to town, taking in what each idiosyncratic village has to offer.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Enjoy a different outdoor adventure every day of the week in **Pucón** (p274) or **Puerto Varas** (p300)
- Climb **Volcán Villarrica** (p280) and peer into its glowing crater
- Pitch fish to the sea lions at the market in **Valdivia** (p285)
- Cross **Parque Nacional Vicente Pérez Rosales** (p306), through the lakes and Andes, into Argentina
- Take the slow boat south to Patagonia on the **Navimag Ferry** (p315)



■ POPULATION: 927,000

■ AREA: 42,108 SQ KM

■ ELEVATION: 0–3000M

History

As the Spanish conquistadors pushed their way south from present-day Santiago, they were motivated by stories of precious metals and the possibility of a large, docile indigenous work force. The land of La Araucanía and the Lakes District would be the ideal territory to continue the imperial dream. Or maybe not. The Mapuche waged one of the fiercest and most successful defenses against the European invaders anywhere in the Americas, and the Spanish were not able to settle south of the Biobío river until the mid to late 19th century.

Germans were recruited to settle the Lakes District, leaving their mark on architecture, food, manufacturing and dairy farming. Today, millions of national and international tourists, plus wealthy Santiago refugees looking for country homes, are doing more than anybody to continue to tame and colonize the once wild lands. Real estate prices are skyrocketing and the several hundred thousand remaining Mapuche are being pushed further and further into the countryside. Tourism, logging and salmon farming are driving the future of this beautiful region.

Climate

Pablo Neruda once wrote that his native La Araucanía was 'the land where the rain was born' where 'threads of rain fell, like long needles of glass snapping off on the roofs or coming up against the windows in transparent waves.' It is here that the Pacific Ocean storm clouds get backed up against the Andes and drop their watery cargo for days or sometimes weeks on end. Fortunately these storms do subside and let forth periods of glorious sunlight. January and February are by far the clearest and warmest months (though you still may need long pants at night), while June and July are the wettest, coldest and frequently windiest months. It does get a touch more chilly in the southern section of the Lakes District, but it makes newspaper headlines when Puerto Montt or Puerto Varas get even one inch of snow.

Getting There & Away

Most visitors enter this region by bus or train from Santiago. All of the major cities also have airports. By the time you get

to Puerto Montt you are pretty far from Santiago and the short flight will save you a lot of time on the bus. Puerto Montt is also the ferry terminus for the Patagonian ferries – the most popular of which takes travelers back and forth to Puerto Natales (see p315).

Getting Around

La Araucanía and the Lakes District have an excellent network of buses: big buses, minibuses, vans, minivans and pretty much anything else that you can imagine. Bus transportation is the easiest and low maintenance way to get around. To get to some of the smaller and more remote towns, it may be necessary to backtrack to the closest city in order to find the correct bus. The roads are generally accessible for rental cars. There are taxis and *colectivos* (shared taxis) within all of the larger towns that cannot be covered on foot.

TEMUCO

☎ 045 / pop 250,000

With around a quarter of a million people and some 50,000 daily commuters, Temuco is one of Chile's fastest growing cities. While it is impoverished around the outskirts, it has a developed core with lots of businesses, shops, markets and even the American fast-food chains that you surely traveled all this way to find. The city is also the regional transportation hub, with steady transportation to Santiago and connections to pretty much everywhere you might want to go in La Araucanía, the Lakes District and beyond. Temuco does not have a lot of attractions in itself, but it does have affordable prices and gives a sense of the culture in the region that can't always be seen in the sanitized-for-your-protection tourist towns like Pucón. If it has nothing else going for it, Temuco can always boast the fact that Pablo Neruda grew up here.

Orientation

On the north bank of the Río Cautín, Temuco is 675km south of Santiago via the Panamericana. To the north of town, historic Cerro Nielol overlooks the city and the river. Residential west Temuco is a more relaxed area of the city with upscale restaurants.

Information

INTERNET ACCESS

Internet cafés are plentiful and inexpensive.

Cibertemuco (☎ 270-500; Diego Portales 888; per hr US\$1; 🕒 10am-8pm)

LAUNDRY

Lavandería Autoservicio Marva (Manuel Montt 415; per load US\$2; 🕒 7am-7pm Mon-Fri, 10am-4pm Sat-Sun)

MEDICAL SERVICES

Hospital Hernán Henríquez Aravena (☎ 212-525; Manuel Montt 115; 🕒 24hr) Six blocks west and one block north of Plaza de Armas Aníbal Pinto.

MONEY

ATMs are abundant, but there are also several exchange houses that can change US cash and traveler's checks.

Casa de Cambio Global (Bulnes 655, Local 1)

POST

Post office (cnr Diego Portales & Prat)

TELEPHONE

Entel (cnr Prat & Manuel Montt; 🕒 9am-7pm Mon-Sat, 11am-4pm Sun)

TOURIST INFORMATION

Sernatur (☎ 211-969; cnr Claro Solar & Bulnes; 🕒 8:30am-8:30pm Mon-Fri, 8:30am-6pm Sat, 8:30am-2pm Sun Jan-Feb, 8:30am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Fri Mar-Dec) Facing the Plaza de Armas Aníbal Pinto; also has city maps and many free leaflets.

Tourist kiosk (☎ 216-360; Mercado Municipal) Has city maps and informative materials, including lodging lists.

Conaf (☎ 298-100; temuco@conaf.cl; Bilbao 931, 2nd fl) Mainly administrative offices, but has maps of the regional parks.

Dangers & Annoyances

Petty thievery is more of a problem in Temuco than other towns, so keep an eye out, particularly for pickpockets at the Mercado Municipal. Also, the market vendors tend to resent being the subject of photos. There have been reports of light crime on the hike up to Cerro Nielol. While this shouldn't discourage you from taking the hike, it is always smart to go with at least one other person.

Sights

MONUMENTO NATURAL CERRO ÑIELOL

Cerro Nielol (☎ 298-222; Calle Prat; adult/child US\$1.50/0.50; 🕒 8:30am-10pm) is a hill that sits among

some 90 hectares of native forests. Chile's national flower, the copihue (*Lapageria rosea*), grows here in abundance, flowering from March to July. It is also of historical importance, since it was here in 1881, at the tree-shaded site known as La Patagua, that Mapuche leaders ceded land to the colonists to found Temuco. Whether or not the actual papers were signed on the hill is up for debate. The park has picnic sites, a small lagoon, footpaths and an environmental information center. Take bus 1 to get to the entrance.

MARKETS

Both the **Mercado Municipal** (☎ 210-964; Aldunate; 🕒 8am-8pm Mon-Sat 8:30am-4pm Sun Oct-Mar, 8:30am-3pm Apr-Sep) and **Feria Libre** (Av Barros Arana; 🕒 8am-5pm) are excellent places to buy traditional Mapuche handicrafts and art (see Shopping, p268).

MUSEO REGIONAL DE LA ARAUCANÍA

Housed in a handsome frontier-style building dating from 1924, this regional **museum** (☎ 730-006; Av Alemania 084; admission US\$1, Sun free; 🕒 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 11am-5pm Sat, 11am-1pm Sun) has permanent exhibits recounting the history of the Araucanian peoples before, during and since the Spanish invasion.

A display on Mapuche resistance to the Spaniards illustrates native weapons, but overlooks the Mapuche's effective guerrilla tactics. There's a good photographic display of early Temuco, including buildings destroyed in the earthquake of 1960 (see p29). Everything is well presented but labeled in Spanish only.

Bus 9 runs from downtown to Av Alemania, but the route is also reasonable walking distance.

Tours

Caminos del Sur (☎ 237-576; Gerona 670), also with offices at the bus terminal and the airport, organizes a variety of tours including ethnotourism with an emphasis on rural communities, such as Mapuche villages.

Sleeping

Temuco is fundamentally not a tourist town, and therefore it can be a bit tricky to find a good place to sleep. Budget options around the train station and Feria Libre are inexpensive and leave something to be desired.