

overlooks a small cove in the lake immediately below to the west, 2¾ to 3½ hours from the Arroyo de los Pumas. Descend directly in steep, loose-earth zigzags before moving over to the left to reach **Playa Blanca** after a further 1½ to two hours. This idyllic little white-sand beach is fringed by lovely *arrayán* myrtle trees. There are idyllic **campsites** here just back in the forest, but fires are not allowed. Campers should be extra conscientious and leave no trace.

## Day 2: Playa Blanca to Refugio Lago Krügger

2½–3¼ hours, 8km

Pick up the route again at the reedy far end of the beach. The often-poor path through *arrayán* leads away from the shore through tall *coigüe* forest. You might see delicate white *palomita* orchids thriving in the damp, humus-rich soil. Listen for the distinctive call of the tiny *chucaco* in the *quila* underbrush. After returning to the lakeside, for some distance the route again moves away left, finally coming out onto a lovely pebble beach at Lago Krügger.

The **Refugio Lago Krügger** (☎ 011 1544-247964; info@lagokruegger.com.ar; www.lagokruegger.com.ar; r per person incl breakfast AR\$200) is 10 minutes on, past the campsite and jetty at the lake outlet. After a complete renovation, the *refugio* has only two double rooms and one triple room, each with a private bathroom. Trekkers can also **camp** (camping per person AR\$15) by the lake a short way from the refugio.

### SIDE TRIP: LAS PALANGANAS

5½–7 hours return, 14km

Follow the path from the southern side of the small clearing in front of the *refugio*. After a short distance, it goes over into a long-disused road that became obsolete after completion of the dam. This broad track leads smoothly down through tall *coigüe* forest into the valley of the **Río Frey**, which flows through a continuous series of white-water rapids. The route passes a sign-posted path turn-off leading down steeply to *Las Gaviotas*, a spot that is favored by fly fishers, after 40 to 50 minutes.

Make your way on for 25 to 30 minutes past more anglers' pools known as *Las Palanganas*, proceeding smoothly through tiny meadows dotted with raspberry bushes and

wild strawberries. Return to Refugio Lago Krügger via the same route.

## Day 3: Refugio Lago Krügger to Villa Futalaufquen

7½–10 hours, 22km, 450m ascent/descent

Get an early start to retrace the route of Days 1 & 2, or take the boat from Lago Krügger to Punta Mattos (see p142).

# RESERVA NACIONAL CERRO CASTILLO

The basalt spires of Cerro Castillo (2675m) are the crowning centerpiece of Reserva Nacional Cerro Castillo, a sprawling 180,000-hectare mountain reserve 75km south of Coyhaique on the Chilean side of the border. Covered by large névés and hanging glaciers, these mountains spill down into lovely valleys of southern beech forest. Though there's fine fishing and trekking, the park has little foot traffic. However, its designation as the landmark route for Sendero de Chile (see p35) in central Patagonia may change that.

## ENVIRONMENT

Reserva Nacional Cerro Castillo is an important sanctuary for the southern Andean deer, or *huemul*. Small numbers of this endangered national icon remain in the central part of the reserve, grazing in secluded upper valleys where recent glacial recession has led to recolonization by palatable plant species. Other mammals sometimes spotted in the reserve include the *chingue*, or Patagonian skunk, and the small *zorrito gris*.

Although uncontrolled burning has scarred a large part of the reserve's periphery, the interior remains a relatively unspoiled wilderness. Open forests of *lenga* mostly cover the subalpine areas up to almost 1200m, generally with little underbrush apart from occasional thickets of thorny *calafate* bushes. Ground-hugging forest plants, such as the devil's strawberry (*frutilla del diablo*), the similar-looking Magellan strawberry (*frutilla de Magallanes*), with pinkish edible berries, and *brecillo*, whose purple berries are a favored



food of foxes and other native fauna, can be found on moister places.

The Chilean flicker, or *pitío*, is an endemic Patagonian woodpecker seen in the drier *lenga* forests of the eastern sector of the reserve. The *pitío* has a greyish crown and brownish-black bands, but its yellow face and upper neck make it easy to recognize. The great-shrike tyrant of Aisén, or *mero austral aiseño*, is a coffee-grey-colored subspecies endemic to the region.

## CLIMATE

Situated well inland and largely sheltered from the far wetter coastal climate by high ranges to the west, Reserva Nacional Cerro Castillo has a continental climate. Annual precipitation levels are relatively moderate by regional standards, generally not exceeding 3000mm on the higher peaks. In the Valle Ibáñez to the south, the reserve borders abruptly on the drier monte terrain so typical of the Andes' eastern fringes, where rainfall is generally under 1000mm. Summers are generally mild, with January temperatures only occasionally rising above 30°C. Winter can bring locally heavy snowfalls above 500m, and the first patches of permanent snow are encountered at a little over 1200m.

## AROUND CERRO CASTILLO

**Duration** 4 days

**Distance** 62km

**Difficulty** moderate-demanding

**Start** Las Horquetas Grandes

**Finish** Villa Cerro Castillo

**Nearest Town** Coyhaique

**Transport** bus

**Summary** A route through a raw alpine landscape where glaciers cling to craggy mountainsides and waterfalls tumble into the valleys.

Towering over the Río Ibáñez and the Carretera Austral, Cerro Castillo is the most prominent peak of the compact Cordillera Castillo. The mountain's Spanish name comes from its many striking basalt turrets and craggy ridges, which resemble a medieval castle. A striking landmark of the Aisén region, this peak regularly attracts international climbers.

This trek leads along the principal section of the Sendero de Chile in the Aisén region. Although it's an increasingly well-trodden route, it requires a high level of fitness and careful navigation. The trek crosses glacier-fed streams in several places, although they are normally manageable and can usually be forded without difficulty. Exposed sections, fallen branches and loose rock must also be negotiated.

An alternative start near Lago Monreal (see Alternative Start p149) is being developed as part of Sendero de Chile – it already exists but lacks adequate signposting. This attractive alternative adds one to two very pleasant days to the trek.

Trekkers uncomfortable with the long, unstable and exposed descent required to reach Campamento Neozelandés on Day 3 should take the Alternative Route (see p150) down to Villa Cerro Castillo, finishing the trek in three rather than four days.

It is possible to camp 6km from the trailhead on the small lake of Laguna Chiguay (see p158 for details).

## PLANNING

### When to Trek

The trek is best done from mid-November to the end of March. Snow covers steep scree on the passes until January, making early crossings preferable, if you don't mind fording bigger rivers.

### What to Bring

There are no *refugios* for trekkers (although Sendero de Chile has plans to construct several along the route). In the meantime a tent is essential.

### Maps

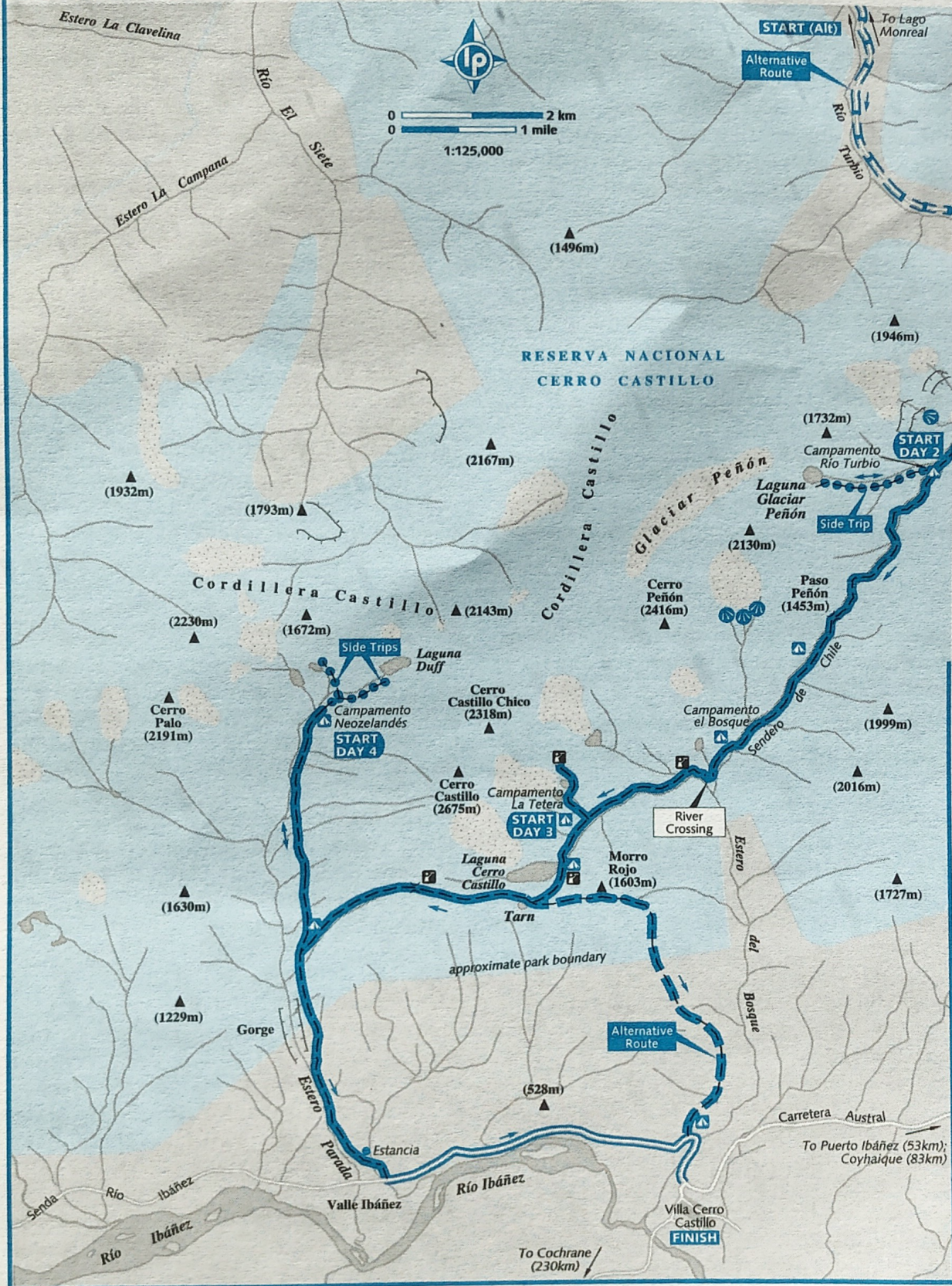
The Chilean IGM 1:50,000 series covers the area of the trek in three maps: *Lago Elizalde* (Section I, No 132), *Balmaceda* (Section I, No 133) and *Villa Cerro Castillo* (Section J, No 10). Although most of the route described here is not shown on these maps, they are still very useful.

### Permits & Regulations

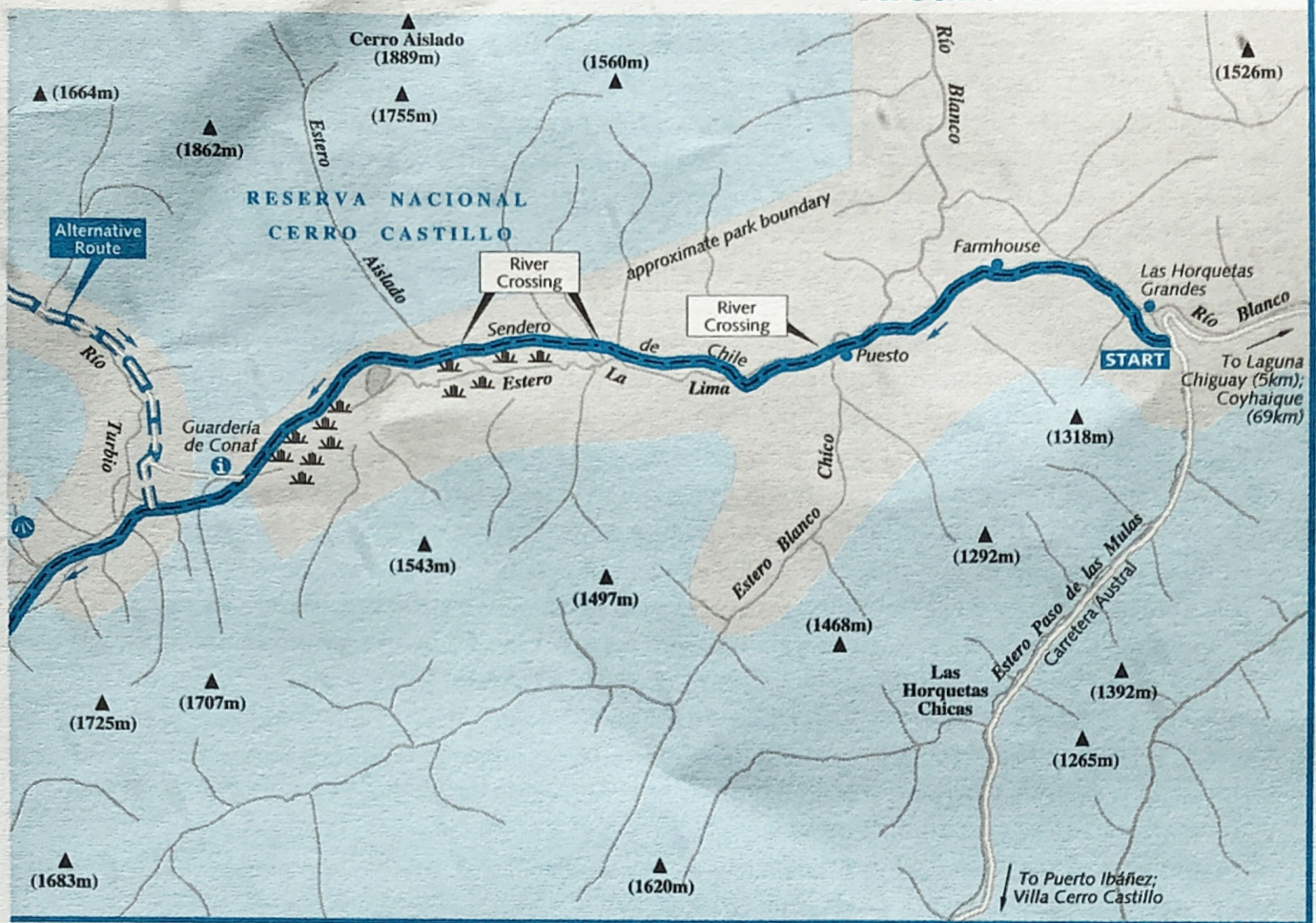
Permits are not required. Trekkers should leave their route details at the guardería at Laguna Chiguay (p158) or at the Conaf office in Coyhaique (p155). Conaf charges a CH\$3000 entry fee at the guardería at



# Around Cerro Castillo



CENTRAL PATAGONIA



Laguna Chiguay. A final optional section of the trek cuts through private property (fee CH\$5000 per person), where trekkers should be on their best behavior.

Due to an increasing number of visitors to this fragile area, please be especially mindful of your impact on the environment (see Responsible Trekking, p36). In particular, avoid campfires in areas without fire pits and be sure to carry out all your garbage – and perhaps that left by less responsible trekkers.

**GETTING TO/FROM THE TREK**

The trek begins at Las Horquetas Grandes, 75km south of Coyhaique. Las Horquetas Grandes is little more than a bend in the Senda Río Ibáñez (the name given to this section of the Carretera Austral), where two minor streams flow together. The Dirección de Vialidad has a small roadworks depot here on the west side of the road.

If arriving from Coyhaique, you can take buses going to either Cochrane (five services weekly), departing around 8am, or Puerto

Ibáñez (CH\$6000, under two hours from Coyhaique to Las Horquetas Grandes). The road is relatively good and the journey takes less than two hours. Private minibuses to Puerto Ibáñez often pick up passengers along Arturo Prat in Coyhaique.

Trekkers arriving at the trailhead from Cochrane or Puerto Ibáñez will disembark shortly after crossing the scenic Paso Las Mulas – but note that Las Horquetas Grandes is after (ie downvalley from) Las Horquetas Chicas.

For those starting at Lago Monreal, Don Dario (☎ 099-3562138) can shuttle passengers from Coyhaique or Balmaceda (one way CH\$50,000) in a private charter for up to 10 passengers.

Alternatively, you can access the trail driving from El Blanco (40km south of Coyhaique) via the gravel road to La Paloma. Take a left-hand turn-off (3km) onto the Lago Monreal road. A 4WD vehicle is recommended in low season.

The trek ends at Villa Cerro Castillo (p158).



## SUSTAINABLE PATAGONIA: ESCUELA DE GUIAS

In rural Patagonia, kids grow up working the great outdoors, not playing in it. As rural ranches become less sustainable, urban migration to cities like Puerto Montt and Coyhaique has become the dominant trend. In these growing regional hubs, the children of rural subsistence farmers grow up as the urban poor.

Enter **Escuela de Guías** ([www.escueladeguias.cl](http://www.escueladeguias.cl)), a nonprofit organization dedicated to training local guides, both farm kids and their urban counterparts, to work in their Patagonian backyard. The idea is to create a sustainable industry that also keeps Patagonia's exceptional natural resources intact. Women in particular are encouraged to participate.

According to its founder, Francisco Vio, a former NOLS (National Outdoor Leadership School) instructor, part of the challenge is 'creating a local outdoors culture', an appreciation of which leads toward wilderness stewardship. Vio sees tourism as a great resource for the region. 'We don't want our students to lose their *campesino* roots,' he assures, 'but by training them with high standards of safety, service and environmental knowledge, they can make a living.'

Case in point: a professional guide can make nearly US\$100 in a day. That same person would otherwise be working the family farm without pay or participating in a work crew – *trabajando en la pala* (working the shovel) – for some US\$10 a day.

Guides-in-training attend 18 months of classroom and field courses, with breaks so attendees can return home to harvest the hay and take care of other responsibilities. Many pay for their studies through work-study, portering real guided trips. So far, 50 of the 60 graduated students are working as guides. The program's success has earned Vio sponsorship by the US-based nonprofit Ashoka, which supports social entrepreneurs.

Since many guides-in-training grew up in the mountains, they are naturals in the field – comfortable with bad weather and minimal equipment. 'All we do,' says Vio, 'is try to get them to value their experience as country people.'

In addition to training guides, Escuela de Guías connects local guides with clients and guides some trips, principally around Coyhaique (p155).



## THE TREK

### Day 1: Las Horquetas Grandes to Upper Río Turbio

3¾–5 hours, 18km, 240m ascent

Cross the bridge over the Estero Paso de Las Mulas just above where it enters the Río Blanco, and follow a dirt road down the true left bank of the river. The road soon turns away westward past a farmhouse, winding on through open *lenga* forest before it drops gently down onto grassy flats beside the **Estero La Lima**, after one to 1¼ hours. Make your way past a rustic **puesto** (outbuilding) and cross the small side stream of the Estero Blanco Chico, heading on upvalley through streamside pastures to easily ford the shallow Estero La Lima itself, after a further 30 to 40 minutes.

After crossing the Estero Aislado, which drains another tiny side valley to the north, the increasingly rough vehicle track skirts above a reedy lagoon frequented by black-necked swans to reach a fork after one to 1¼ hours. To the right, the **Guardería de**

**Conaf** post charges a park entry fee. After paying, take the left-hand branch, which avoids a *mallín* stretching along the poorly drained valley floor, before it (almost imperceptibly) crosses a watershed to meet the **Río Turbio**, another 30 to 40 minutes on. This roaring white-water torrent flows through a wild upper valley below the Cordillera Castillo, its towering peaks visible along much of the approach route.

Follow an indistinct 4WD track southwest along the broad gravelly valley floor below waterfalls spilling over sheer cliffs from hanging glaciers up to your right. Where the vehicle track finally peters out, after 30 to 40 minutes, pick up a trail that continues into the *lenga* forest. The route crosses a clear brook before climbing gently rightward onto an open field of old glacial debris now covered by tussocky alpine grasses and *chaura* berries, a further 10 to 15 minutes on. There is scenic *Campamento Río Turbio* around this pretty head of the Río Turbio valley, where *huemul* deer sometimes graze.

## ALTERNATIVE START: LAGO MONREAL TO CAMPAMENTO EL TURBIO

12–16 hours / 2 days, 20.7km

Day 1 (six to eight hours, 11.2km) begins on an old logging road that crosses a wooden bridge over the outlet stream for Lago Monreal. The road crosses gates (always close behind you), heading uphill over exposed terrain, arriving at an old logging camp with a steam engine. Here a Conaf sign marks the trail, which veers off right from the logging road. Continue for 30 minutes until you reach a sign for the Cerro Castillo Reserve and a gate.

Continue on a logging trail, which arrives in one hour at a picnic table near a large boulder (site of a future Conaf post). Equipped with an outhouse, it's a good spot for camping. Cross a small stream on a bridge improvised out of logs, and then continue through a *mallín* marked by stakes. Enter a *lenga* forest and climb to Mirador La Paloma, a right turn-off veering 10 minutes from the main trail, where condors dive over the spectacular Lago Monreal. Watch the steep banks for grazing *huemul*.

The trail continues through lovely forest, descending to a small stream (a good place to fill up on water) and rising again to an open scree field known as *el carro*. Be careful on the loose sand; it's quite exposed. Crossing this section, always maintaining the same elevation, takes one to two hours. Trekking poles come in handy if conditions are windy.

Re-enter the forest for a half-hour, coming to a small bridge and red-and-white trail markings. Cross Río El Salto to reach Campamento El Salto, with a bathroom, table and fire pit, adequate for a few tents.

On the second day (six to eight hours, 9.5km), start a steep climb through the *lenga* forest above camp, coming to a stream that rises vertically to open alpine terrain. Climb the stream bank, staying true left of the river, until you reach a high alpine meadow above the tree line surrounded by snowy peaks. The total climb should take about two hours. This spectacular location has southeast headwalls perfect for winter ski turns. Follow the relatively flat valley south for another 1½ hours, passing cairns and snow patches. Stay left of the stream.

Arrive at the saddle known as **El Portazuelo**. Descend directly over the snow and

follow the cairns that lead left, descending uncomfortably through scree. A cairn marks the forest entry just past a small stream crossing. The well-defined forested trail eventually widens into a logging road and descends. Follow the road to the **Guardería de Conaf** to register and pay the park entry fee (CH\$3000).

Use the Day 1 route directions from the **Guardería de Conaf** post to arrive at Campamento el Turbio, 40 minutes on.

## SIDE TRIP: LAGUNA GLACIAR PEÑÓN

3 hours return, 6km

Receding at an alarming pace, the Glaciar Peñón curls down from the heart of the Cordillera Castillo as the source of the Río Turbio. Follow the river's boulder-strewn south bank west from the clear brook (see Day 1) for 20 to 30 minutes to a murky meltwater pool below Glaciar Peñón. Beware of the ice.

## Day 2: Upper Río Turbio to Campamento La Tetera

4¼–5¾ hours, 14km, 775m ascent

Follow the trail on up southwest as the terrain steepens and the forest goes over into scrub. Higher up the path is less distinct, but the going is relatively easy close to the cascading stream. The route climbs on higher into a rocky gully, passing streamlets splashing down from a small névé up to the right before reaching **Paso Peñón** (1453m), after 1½ to two hours. Paso Peñón is a long, narrow gap filled by frost-shattered rock and accumulated winter snow (which may remain well into February). From the southern end of the pass, the high, turquoise lake visible roughly southwest indicates the way ahead.

Descend cautiously onto steep and unstable scree-covered slopes, directly opposite spectacular icefalls gripping the raw eastern flank of Cerro Peñón that produce numerous meltwater cascades. Cut left across the glacial wash below to pick up random trails leading down the stream's forested left bank. After making a sometimes uncomfortable ford (which is easier where the stream briefly divides into two channels) you reach some reasonable unofficial **campsites**.

Continue on downstream to arrive at the Estero del Bosque junction, just 1½ to two hours from Paso Peñón. Here, the eastern



branch of the Estero del Bosque merges with the somewhat larger western branch before racing through a narrow canyon. Winter avalanches sweeping off the southern side of Cerro Peñón have flattened much of the forest around this stream junction. Slightly uphill you will find **Campamento El Bosque**, with picnic tables and a primitive toilet.

Head up along embankments on the true left (ie northwestern) side of the west branch of the Estero de Bosque to meet a rocky streamway, after 50 minutes to 1¼ hours, then move a short way up right where the trail ducks back into the weather-beaten scrub. The path continues upvalley for 10 or 15 minutes to the sheltered campsites of **Campamento La Tetera**. Conaf plans to install primitive toilets here in the future.

After making camp, it's well worth climbing either moraine ridge to reach **several tarns** on the shelf behind the waterfall; more adventurous and energetic trekkers can climb the loose bare slopes on the right for more spectacular views.

### Day 3: Campamento La Tetera to Campamento Neozelandés

6–8 hours, 11km, 650m ascent

Continue upvalley, crossing a side stream that spills down in a large cascade fed by an icefall on Cerro Castillo Chico. Ascend 15 to 20 minutes through streamside meadows interspersed with *lenga* thickets to arrive at **Laguna Cerro Castillo**. A stunning sight, the lake lies at 1275m above sea level in a deep glacial basin directly under the imposing Cerro Castillo (2675m). Hanging glaciers periodically drop ice blocks onto the rock cliffs below, where they shatter and occasionally hit the water. The open stony ground around the lake offers scenic views but it's too exposed for camping.

Cross the lake's outlet stream on stepping-stones. Climb diagonally left along coarse, bare moraines to a very narrow shelf high above the lake and follow this around to reach a broad, flat saddle just west of Morro Rojo after one hour. This spot offers a fine view to Cerro Castillo directly opposite (although you'll need a 28mm lens to get it all in one shot!). Trek a short way left across the saddle to a tarn, from where you can see Villa Cerro Castillo and, down along the Valle Ibáñez, as far as Lago General Carrera.

The **Alternative Route** (see below) leaves the main trail here.

Continue westward along a shelf opposite the basalt turrets of Cerro Castillo, before climbing easily over boulder rubble to reach a rocky gap after one hour. This ridgetop overlooks the wild, forested valley of the Estero Parada, which is enclosed by interesting jagged peaks. This section requires some care. Most trekkers drop directly into the steep, scree-filled gully ahead, following its right side as it curves leftward into the trees to meet a prominent path coming up through the valley, 1½ hours on. A longer but less rough option is to climb north to a forested ridge, then follow it down to meet the path after one to 1½ hours on.

Head upvalley through the *lenga* forest, passing **campsites** by the Estero Parada (not far downstream from where a large glacial tributary enters from an adjacent side valley). The path rises steadily onward, skirting soggy bogs close to the stream to arrive at **Campamento Neozelandés**, 1½ to two hours on. This is where a small mountaineering party from New Zealand established its base camp in 1976, making a number of first ascents in the area. This beautiful valley head is a great place to pitch your tent, but dry and level sites are limited.

#### SIDE TRIP: UPPER VALLE PARADA

2–3 hours return, 2–3km

The upper valley is enclosed on three sides by jagged summits of the Cordillera Castillo, and half a day or so might be spent exploring this area. **Laguna Duff**, a small tarn set in bare surroundings under Cerro Castillo Chico, can be visited from Campamento Neozelandés by heading up beside the narrow eastern branch of the Estero Parada. After the path peters out, continue over mossy slopes and glacial debris to the lake. On the west side of the valley, two more lakes formed by end moraines are best reached by crossing the east stream and heading round underneath the cliff face.

#### ALTERNATIVE ROUTE: LAGUNA CERRO CASTILLO TO VILLA CERRO CASTILLO

3½–4½ hours, 11km, 1100m descent

A more direct (although not particularly rewarding) route down to Villa Cerro Castillo leaves from the saddle west of Morro



Rojo (see Day 3). First contour eastward around Morro Rojo's southern side, before descending 1km along a steep spur to a prominent cairn. Here, move rightward and pick up an initially vague trail. The route improves as it leads down roughly southeast through regenerating forest into a fire-cleared area, then past a corral and a private property gate to meet a 4WD track. Follow this track down past a farmhouse to the meet the Río Ibáñez road at the Estero del Bosque bridge. Continue as described on Day 4.

### Day 4: Campamento Neozelandés to Villa Cerro Castillo

4–5 hours, 19km, 870m descent

Backtrack downvalley to the rocky stream gully where you first encountered the trail (see Day 3). After climbing over a minor ridge, follow the path across burnt-out slopes scattered with wild strawberries, above where the Estero Parada races through a deep chasm. The route descends gently through pockets of *lenga* forest, before dropping rightward to the banks of the stream on the wide, open **Valle Ibáñez**. Now on the private property of an *estancia* (large cattle or sheep property), cut down left across rocky pastures past a homestead sheltered by graceful poplars, 2¼ to three hours after you left Campamento Neozelandés.

Head slightly south of east along a farm track across rich grassy flats grazed by sheep and *bandurrias* (black-necked ibis), then take a graded road on through *ñirre* scrub and *calafate* bushes to meet the Río Ibáñez after 40 to 50 minutes. The glacial waters of this large, swift-moving river flow through deep channels. Proceed on over a sandy plain to cross the Estero del Bosque on a bridge (where the Alternative Route rejoins the route), then continue a short way down the road to arrive at **Villa Cerro Castillo** after a final one to 1½ hours.

## MORE TREKS

### PARQUE NACIONAL HORNOPIRÉN

This 482-sq-km Chilean national park lies southeast of Puerto Montt near the village of Hornopirén on the Carretera Austral.

The park centers on the 1572m cone of Volcán Hornopirén, whose name (a curious mixture of Mapuche and Spanish) means 'oven of snow'.

**Buses Fierro** (☎ 065-253022; Plaza de Armas) has three buses daily between Hornopirén and Puerto Montt (CH\$3500, three hours); schedules change, so ask around. The bus trip includes a ferry crossing between Caleta Puelche and Caleta La Arena on Estuario/Seno Reloncaví. The ferry runs on a two- or three-hourly schedule in either direction.

### Lago Cabrera

A two-day return trek from Hornopirén follows a good horse trail through the forest along the western side of Volcán Hornopirén to the eastern shore of Lago Cabrera, from where there are good views across the lake to the superb 2111m Volcán Yates. Volcán Hornopirén can be climbed from its eastern side.

The Chilean IGM's 1:50,000 map *Volcán Hornopirén* (Section H, No 72) covers virtually all of the park; the adjoining map *Volcán Apagado* (Section H, No 71) is also useful.

### PARQUE PUMALÍN Valle Ventisquero

A large tributary of the Río Puelo, the Río Ventisquero (Glaciar River) drains the northeasternmost area of Parque Pumalín. This beautiful river valley can be visited in a four-day return trek from the village of Llanada Grande, about halfway up the Río Puelo. **Hospedaje El Salto** (☎ 02-196-9212; agroturelsalto@gmail.com; r per person without bathroom CH\$21,000) can arrange local guides.

From Llanada Grande, it's a long day's trek upriver via El Portón to the hanging bridge known as La Pasarela, which you cross before continuing in another long day up the Río Ventisquero to Fundo Rincón Bonito, an isolated farm belonging to Parque Pumalín. Since this trek crosses mostly private property, trekkers should be on their best behavior. Leave all livestock gates as is and always ask the nearest farmhouse if it's OK before setting up camp. Nothing is signposted, but local guides can also take visitors to Lago Azul, Lago Las Rocas and Segundo Corral. A new road leads up the river to (eventually) connect

