Backpack your way towards Cerro Castillo’s towers and ice

Cerro Castillo has become one of the most famous mountains in the Aysén Region, thanks to its tremendous beauty and awesome spires, which resemble a medieval stone castle. There is a fantastic four-day backpacking route that weaves through the passes to the base of the towers before dropping down into the tiny village below. Over the past several years, it has become one of the most popular and highlighted treks in Patagonia; one you probably don’t want to miss!

**DATA SHEET**

- **Activity Type:** Backpacking.
- **Start:** Cerro Castillo National Reserve, Las Horquetas Sector.
- **Finish:** Villa Cerro Castillo.
- **Distance:** 43 Km.
- **Duration:** Four Days – three nights, according to this itinerary. The trek can range from three to six days.
After paying a visit to Cerro Castillo you’ll undoubtedly agree: from afar, this mountain is impressive, but experiencing it up close and personal, touching its glaciers, hiking beneath the needles of rock and swimming in its aquamarine lagoon, leaves you speechless! This Patagonian icon is located within the Cerro Castillo National Reserve, where the hiking trails provide the route for intimate encounters with the mountain and its landscapes, dominated by forests, rivers, hanging glaciers, crystal waterfalls, and native flora and fauna. For now, it’s still fairly uncommon to encounter a lot of other hikers along the way, but this circuit is well on the way to becoming one of the most famous in Patagonia, ranking amongst epic hikes like those in Torres del Paine, El Chaltén and the Dientes del Navarino.

But before hitting the trail, PLEASE consider these useful tips.

At this stage of your trip you’ve probably come to realize that the weather in Patagonia is extremely variable. In the mountains it is even more extreme and should be treated with preparation and respect. In Patagonia, the mountains are the boss, not you, and one can never tell when a snow squall could change your plans. You have to be willing to make unexpected changes in your itinerary, by shortening your route or even having to cancel the hike altogether. No matter the season and time of year, it is very likely that you will experience sun, rain, snow and wind. Sometimes all at the same time! Secondly, please note that this is not a trek for beginners. Walking through this reserve involves river and stream crossings and areas where you’ll hike over rock scree. Not all the sections along the trail are well marked. Campsite infrastructure includes rustic latrines and fire rings. You need to carry all necessary equipment to be self-sufficient. We recommend technical trekking equipment: a 4 season tent, layered technical clothing (rain gear, gaiters, etc.), trekking poles, a personal first aid kit, a gas stove for cooking and enough food for extra days, in case of a change of plans.

Don’t forget gloves, brimmed and wool hats, sunglasses and sunscreen.

Reservations: There are several regional companies that offer this trek. It is important to choose a guide with significant experience working in the reserve, good equipment, practice hiking in adverse weather conditions, and training in first aid and search and rescue.

Some options include:

Cristian Solis, Expediciones GeoSur – Coyhaique: Simón Bolívar 521; (09) 92648671; www.geosurexpediciones.com; cristian@geosurexpediciones.com

Cristian Vidal and Mary Brys, Senderos Patagonia - Villa Cerro Castillo: Carretera Austral s/n; Km 100; (09) 62057166 - (09) 62244725; senderospatagonia@gmail.com

Hugo Castañeda, Alma Patagónica Expediciones – Coyhaique: Ignacio Serrano 621; (09) 76183588; contacto@almapatagonica.cl; www.almapatagonica.cl

Manuel Medina, Aventura Tehuelche – Coyhaique: Pimpinela 723; (09) 84118736; aventuratehuelche@gmail.com; www.aventuratehuelche.cl

Seasonality: December to March

Special Considerations: The trail has several technical areas, including two mountain passes. There are stream crossings and areas where you’ll hike over rock scree. Not all the sections along the trail are well marked. Campsite infrastructure includes rustic latrines and fire rings. You need to carry all necessary equipment to be self-sufficient. We recommend technical trekking equipment: a 4 season tent, layered technical clothing (rain gear, gaiters, etc.), trekking poles, a personal first aid kit, a gas stove for cooking and enough food for extra days, in case of a change of plans.

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crossings (many), thick forests, and high alpine valleys (including a steep mountain pass) where you'll be exposed to all the risks and furies of the Patagonian climate. Some of the trails are established and well-marked and in other sectors, you won't see a single trace. If you have trekking experience, good navigational skills, and all the appropriate equipment, you won't have a problem hiking this circuit on your own. Make sure you have a good map, (some of the outfitters in Coyhaique sell topographical maps or you can obtain an official CONAF map of the area), and a few surplus days in case you encounter unexpected weather or need to go slower than you thought.

Don't worry if you're new to trekking or wish you were in a bit better physical condition, or lack the proper equipment, (good tents and a camp stove are musts). Simply give one of the local professional guides who work in the area a call.

They are awesome! In fact, no matter who you are, we recommend hitting the trails of this reserve with a guide; you'll have a more relaxed trip without the need to worry about logistics or carry all the gear, and working with a local guide allows you the chance to discover all the secret details of these landscapes. Each of the guides has their own version of this hike, with special places to show you and preferences on where to stop and where to camp along the way. A lot will depend on your experience and the condition of the terrain. The following four day, three night itinerary is based on the route that we hiked with Cristian Solis, owner of GeoSur Expediciones, (www.geosurexpediciones.com), a regional company with more than 10 years of experience offering guided trekking expeditions in the area.

**Day 1 - Las Horquetas – Turbio River Camp (16 km).** The trail starts in the sector known as Las Horquetas, along the Carretera Austral (68 km from Coyhaique). The initial trail follows an old logging road still used by local gauchos to herd their animals to the valleys during the summer months, thus make sure you close any gates as you pass through their farms! You'll alternate between forested areas that were burnt in wildfires that swept the area decades ago, and vibrant lenga forest, all the while bordering a crystal-clear stream that you'll wade across on three occasions. The crossings are shallow but you should wear sandals so that your hiking boots don't get soaked. After walking approximately 14 km, you'll arrive at the Conaf shelter and post, where you will register and pay the National Reserve's entrance fee. Two kilometers further you'll find the Turbio River Camp, where you can assemble your tent, cook dinner and appreciate a well-deserved rest.

**Day 2 – Turbio River Camp - Bosque Camp (8 km).** The second day of this hike starts along the river that flows down from the Turbio Glacier. Little by little you'll climb, first through forests, and then along a steep section of rock scree to cross the saddle of El Peñón (1,460 m). Depending on the time of year, you may be crossing this section on snow, but, one thing is certain, your legs will be ready for a break upon reaching the next campsite! Luckily, the views are incredible, offering a great excuse to stop and catch your breath while photographing the magnificent glaciers of the Cerro Castillo range, which seem just an arm's reach away. This is also a great spot to view condors drifting and gliding through the peaks. Once you've descended from El Peñón, the trail borders the Peñón Glacier Stream for a while, during which you'll get your first amazing views of the “castle” before climbing a bit more through the woods to your camp.

**Day 3 – Bosque Camp - Porteadores Camp (9 Km).** You'll start day three with a strong initial climb along the banks of the river that pours down from the Cerro Castillo Glacial Lagoon, until you reach a small plateau at the base of the “Castle” itself.
Once you’ve had a break (and filled your camera’s memory card), you’ll begin to climb the moraine surrounding the lagoon to an overlook so spectacular, we swear you won’t want to leave. The mountain seems so close you can almost touch it and provides a perfect contrast for the turquoise lagoon as you listen to the sound of ice sliding down the mountain and shattering into the water. The trail continues along the rocky terrain to a vantage point that (on a cloudless day), shows the entire Ibañéz Valley, all the way to General Carrera Lake and Argentina. You’ve really got to see it to believe it. Next, you’ll cross the saddle of Cerro Castillo (1,600 m), and begin a slow descent back to the forest and the Porteadores Camp, accompanied by impressive views of Cerro Palo.

**Day 4- Porteadores Camp - Villa Cerro Castillo (10 km).** The descent to Villa Cerro Castillo begins by bordering the edge of the Parada River Canyon, where you’ll have excellent panoramic views of the Ibañéz River and Valley. You’ll exit the reserve walking through a typical Patagonian ranch, amongst grazing sheep and cows, and then hike back to town along a rural road.
TRAVEL TIP

The Las Ardillas Sector, between Villa Cerro Castillo and Puerto Ibáñez, is famous for its many lakes, rivers and lagoons, all perfect for fly-fishing. If you want to stay in the area for a longer period of time, contact the Lago Tamango Cabanas, Alto Río Ibáñez Sector s/n, 19 km from Villa Cerro Castillo; (09) 99193708 - 93195627 - 98136634; email: info@lagotamango.com; www.lagotamango.com. There are two cabanas that can accommodate up to 11 people and a quincho for barbecues.
PHOTOGRAPHS

Photographs that complement this story
The flavors and culinary knowledge can be a memorable aspect of his travels in Aysén. Every corner has its own recipes and dishes. Discover your favorite recipes here.

Recipe for Canned Nalca in Light Syrup

Four 1/2 quart jars

Ingredientes

4 large stalks of nalca
2 cups of granulated sugar
4 cups of water
4 sterilized 1/2 quart canning jars (460 ml)

PreparaciĂłn

First, sterilize the canning jars. Within an hour of filling, you will need to sterilize the jars by placing them (empty) in a large pot and completely covering with water. Bring to a full, rolling boil and allow the jars to bath for at least 15 minutes. Turn off the heat and fill. Note: Do not boil the canning lids as this can harm their seal; add them to the hot water when the jars have finished boiling after you turn off the heat. Prep the nalca: when working with nalca, you
should use wooden or stainless steel utensils (knives, colanders, etc.), so as to avoid discoloring the stalks (the nalca becomes black when it comes in contact with other metals). First, peel the outer skin of the nalca stalk, removing the spines and the veins. Then, slice the nalca in thin discs (1cm) or chop it into small cubes, wash well with cold water, and drain in a colander. In a clean pot, heat the water and sugar to a boil, allowing the sugar to completely dissolve, then set aside to cool. Place the nalca slices (or cubes) in the jars in an organized manner so as to maximize the volume of fruit and incorporate the syrup (approximately 1 cup of liquid for each jar). Cover the jars and put them in a large pot with cold water (the water should completely cover the jars by at least 5 cm, heat the water and let it boil for 20 minutes. Remove the pot from the heat and allow to cool. Afterwards, remove the jars and store in a cool place. It’s time to enjoy! Don’t forget to save a few jars for those days when you are craving a bit of Patagonian Springtime.

Farm-raised chicken & polenta cazuela

6 portions

Ingredientes

1 medium onion, sliced in large strips
3 large carrots, sliced
4 cloves of garlic, diced finely (but not minced!)
1/2 of a small green chili pepper, diced finely
2 Tablespoons of vegetable oil
1/2 teaspoon of cumin
1/2 teaspoon of black pepper
1/4 teaspoon of merquén (a traditional Mapuche condiment made from ground smoked chili peppers and coriander)
1 tablespoon of oregano
One whole, farm-raised chicken, divided into six portions
1/4 of a small red or green pepper, diced finely
6 potatoes “cazueleras,” which means that they should fit in the palm of your hand
1 cup of polenta (in Aysén, this is often called chuchoca)
Water
Salt
Cilantro or parsley

Preparación

In a large pot, add the onion, carrots, garlic, green chili pepper, vegetable oil, cumin, pepper, merquen and oregano and sauté for a few moments. Add the chicken, salt (to taste) and the green or red pepper over this base of vegetables and spices. Stir to blend and sauté a few minutes more to brown the chicken. Following the advice of our specialist, you should now cover the pot and shake it a bit to blend the flavors. Lower the heat and wait for the chicken to change colors, stirring the mixture to keep it from sticking or burning. Add a cup of boiling water over the mixture and simmer for another 5 minutes before adding more boiling water to cover the chicken and vegetables completely. Once the carrots are al dente, add the potatoes, more salt if needed and return to a medium heat to cook the ingredients well. When the Cazuela is almost ready, dissolve the polenta in a glass jar filled with
cold water to keep it from becoming lumpy, and then, slowly add it over the soup, stirring the mixture with a wooden spoon. Remove from the heat and allow to rest for around 10 minutes before serving. Ladle into individual bowls with portions of all ingredients and top with chopped cilantro or parsley - the smell will be irresistible! For true Patagonia style, you'll want to serve your Cazuela with tortas fritas and fresh lettuce, picked from the garden and served with a dressing of vegetable oil, fresh lemon juice and salt.
If a picture is worth a thousand words, a video is worth a million, is not it? Here you will find some of the best for this sector.

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