

ACCESSIBILITY REVIEW CHILE: PATAGONIA ACTIVITIES

Following is a rough accessibility review for wheelchair users and people with reduced mobility regarding some of the tours and activities available to do while in the Chilean Patagonia. At the end of the document, there is also accessibility information on the main cities of the area, as well as of Santiago de Chile, where you will probably be flying through. The whole review is aimed at both people with disabilities that may be considering a trip to the Patagonia, as well as at tour operators that want to identify the main accessibility issues, especially for wheelchair users and for people with reduced mobility, in order to improve.

Before going into detail, a general consideration is that, for most activities, you should be able to go up and down steps in a regular basis or have a means to do so (with help from others or if you feel comfortable with people trying to carry you, as not everyone likes it and not everyone can be carried), as you will encounter many steps to go up and down all means of transportation (mainly buses, vans and boats).

Also, when I talk about accessible restrooms or toilets, most accessible toilets that I found in the Patagonia only take into account that a wheelchair can fit in it. Grab bars are either lacking or not in the proper place, buttons or levers to flush and light switches may be unreachable, toilet paper may be far away, sinks tend to be low, but sometimes they are not, etc. So they may be accessible only if you have assistance.

Having said that, it is also worth to mention that, despite poor accessibility and the unavoidable hassle that you will go through, landscapes are outstanding and all activities provide unforgettable experiences, if you manage to do them.



Photo 1. Magellan Penguins at Magdalena Island.

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1. MAGDALENA ISLAND: MAGELLAN PENGUINS (GROUP TOUR)

At Magdalena Island, thousands of Magellan penguins roam freely and breed in their natural habitat. If you had to choose between penguin activities while in Punta Arenas (taking into account the accessibility issues that I will mention, especially if you don't have a private vehicle, which may be more accessible for the King Penguin tour), I would go for this one, as it is way shorter and you get to experience penguins from closer.



Photo 2. Magellan Penguin stretching their wings.

1. All in all, the tour is about 4 to 5 hours long.

2. The van that takes you from the hotel to the boat is not wheelchair accessible. There is not much storage space in the trunk as seats nearly reach the end of the vehicle, so your chair needs to be foldable or disassembled in some way. If you're lucky, you may get a van with more space (see next activity), so if you're worried, ask about it. Also, some drivers carry a step stool to help you get on the van, but some don't. Ours didn't, even after coming back for us on a second trip, as the van was full and he got nervous and worried our wheelchairs would not fit (they would have).

3. The boat is not wheelchair accessible either. The main issues are as follows:

a) Boarding was extremely difficult. The boat has two levels. Depending on the tide, the plank from the jetty to the boat is steeper. In our case, it was too steep to go to the upper level (the one that we apparently had tickets for, which is more expensive), so we had to go to the lower one. The plank was still steep and very narrow. A wheelchair could not go through the plank. If the plank was wider, the

anti-slipping metal “steps” on the plank would also be a problem for wheelchairs with a low floor (most power wheelchairs) or wheelchairs that cannot raise the front wheels. Thus wheelchairs had to be lifted on board passing them over water, as the plank was too narrow (with heavy power wheelchairs this would be extremely difficult and dangerous). Also, there was no space on the plank for anyone to effectively help us walk it. This had to be done 4 times in total to get on and off the boat.

b) To access the lower cabin from the deck, there is a small step. A small ramp could be used to bypass it.

c) To access the upper cabin there are only narrow stairs.

d) The exterior lateral aisles or corridors of the boat are very narrow (less than 50cm), thus a wheelchair cannot go through them. This was a major problem to disembark at Magdalena Island, as we had to walk all the corridor and then, again, go through the plank. As the corridor is very narrow, no one can effectively help you walk all the distance (about 20-25 meters) and lifting someone would be very dangerous as water is just nearby. If you cannot stand, crawling would be the only alternative...

e) Inside the cabin, there are no accessible toilets.

f) Inside the cabin, the only place that we could stay with our wheelchairs was in front of the bar and toilet area. From that area, you barely see the windows and you cannot see any of the wildlife that you may encounter during the trip. There was no seating or reserved space for wheelchairs.

g) We were made to sit on regular seats on our way to Magdalena Island, which for non-standard bodies, are way more uncomfortable than our wheelchairs. Some wheelchair users cannot seat on regular seats. As we boarded last, we had to settle for seats on the middle of the boat, with no window view, even less from our lower point of view. On the way back, they forgot about it, so luckily we got to seat on our wheelchairs.

4. We were told that there was another company (the one leaving from a harbor further away from the city center) where boarding was easier and with wider exterior corridors on each side of the boat, but we were not able to confirm it. We did see a jetty over the water (with 3 steps) at Magdalena Island used by said company to disembark, which probably helped avoid the steep plank. On our boat, the plank to get off led directly to the beach way below, thus the incline.

5. At Magdalena Island, the first few meters on the beach are a stretch of water, seaweed and big pebbles/stones, so it's impossible for a wheelchair. Part of the trail towards the first viewpoint is mostly flat (a little uphill). It is a dirt path with small rocks. There are a couple of steeper sections that are very difficult for wheelchair users due to the climb and uneven and slippery terrain (dirt and loose pebbles/small rocks). From

the first viewpoint onward, it's completely uphill and uneven, so the whole tour is not wheelchair accessible or close to it.

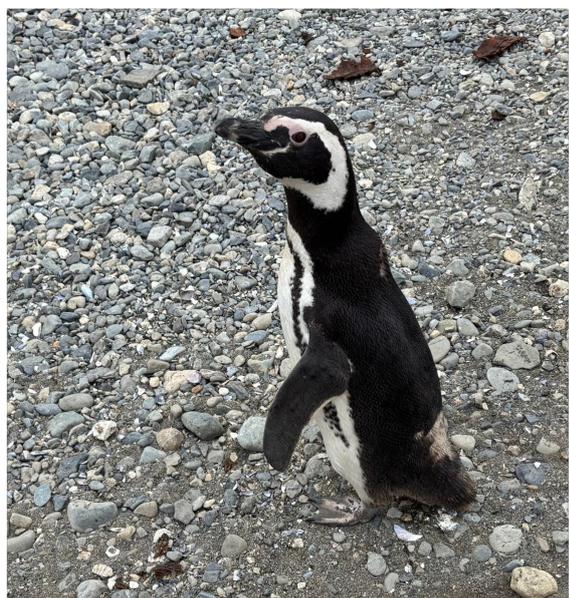


Photo 3. Loose pebbles rocky terrain.



Photo 4. Penguins on the dirt path.

6. My friend (a manual wheelchair user that can only take a few steps while holding on to the wheelchair or a grab rail) stayed at the beach where we disembarked. As the rest of the group went away, penguins got very close, so he was able to enjoy the experience.

7. I (a manual wheelchair user with power assist who can walk 10-50 meters with a crutch and effort) managed to reach the first viewpoint, but left the wheelchair the last 15 meters, as, even with a couple of members from the crew pushing and pulling from the chair, due to the rough terrain my body was hurting all over. As people kept onto the rest of the trail, I was also able to enjoy the penguins on my own. There are many around, so just reaching the island and getting off the boat is enough to enjoy the experience.

8. On the way back from the boat to the hotel they came with a car just for the two of us, instead of the van, which helped getting on and off (it was lower and there was more storage space available).

2. TIERRA DEL FUEGO AND KING PENGUIN PARK (GROUP TOUR)

Overall, even though the bit with the King Penguins is enjoyable, I think that this is the least recommended activity for wheelchair users or people with reduced mobility from the listed activities in terms of effort and reward. With an accessible private vehicle and a shorter version of the tour, things would be different.

1. The tour is very long. From 7am to 11pm at night. The website said that at most we would return by 9pm. Apparently it is normal for it to end later. This information is very important for people with disabilities, as schedules are very important for rest, medication, planning and so on.

2. Same problems with the van to get on and off, as it was not accessible. Vans have high floors, thus high steps to get on them. In this case, they had a small step stool that helped, but some vans don't have them. It is an important point.

3. This time the van had a bit more cargo space, which is also an important point while carrying non 100% foldable wheelchairs.

4. There were lots of stops during the tour, so you had to get on and off the van a lot. With so many stops it seemed as if we were making time to comply with the entry and crossing times that we had been given to the King Penguin park and for the ferries. A tour option of just going to and from the King Penguin park (probably still about 8 hours long), may be more manageable for many tourists, including people with disabilities and the elderly.



Photo 5. Viewpoint at the King Penguin Park.

5. Here is a comment on each of the stops:

a) Estancia San Gregorio: there were a couple of steps at the entrance, plus 6 or 7 steps more to access the first area inside. In total, I had to walk about 50 meters. It was not worth it, as the place smelled poorly and the view from my height was not good.

b) Shipwreck: you needed to walk 20 to 30 meters on narrow dirt paths and sand. Not suitable for a wheelchair.

c) Shorter Car Ferry to cross the Magellan strait on its narrowest point: to get to the passenger resting area there were several stairs. The way between cars, vans and trucks was too narrow for most wheelchairs, plus the protruding anti-slipping metallic bands on the floor make it very difficult for wheelchairs that may pass between cars to move around. There is no accessible toilet either. I managed to reach a non-accessible one (my wheelchair is 50cm wide) and then I stayed in the van with no view.

d) Museum at Cerro Sombrero: it's located on top of a hill and it can only be accessed through many stairs. I stayed in the van, so missed this part completely. Steps on the stairs were wide and they required walking a few steps in between each of them. There were many. Between 50 and 200 hundred, I cannot tell.

e) Lunch at Cerro Sombrero: it was wheelchair accessible, as it had a ramp to access and chairs could be moved to create space for the wheelchair at the table. I did not check if there was an accessible restroom, but I don't think so.

f) King Penguin Park: from the car park to the wooden boardwalk at the entrance there are a few meters of rough terrain (compact dirt with smaller loose rocks). The boards in the boardwalk were quite even and gaps between them were small. After the ticket area, the path to do the tour and reach the viewpoints varies a little bit. In general, it is a mostly flat dirt path with smaller loose pebbles/rocks, but parts of it have softer sand, so wheelchairs can get stuck on it. Also, some parts are a bit uneven, so it would require an experienced manual wheelchair user with wider tires to do it. Fortunately, at the park they have a beach wheelchair. Someone needs to push it for you. In my case, they allowed our van guide to do so. Unfortunately, there is only one beach wheelchair, so if your travel group has more than one wheelchair user, you've got a problem (this time I did the activity alone because my friend was too tired and in pain from the lack of accessibility of the activity on the previous day). The whole tour is about 500 meters. From the wheelchair, the view at the viewpoints is not optimal, as you cannot position yourself next to the windowsill (the wheelchair is bulky and the windowsill of the viewpoint hut is a bit high; more than 100cm). Also, the mounted metal binoculars cannot be used if you cannot stand up. Binoculars are a must to observe the penguins as they are about 50 meters away. There is a viewpoint with a clearer view (there is no hut), but it's the one where penguins are further away. The entrance to the park is free for people with disabilities, so it kind of compensates for the accessibility issues.

g) Porvenir: we did 3 stops at the town of Porvenir while waiting for the next ferry to leave. One at some public restrooms (I don't know if there was an accessible one), one at a small square with statues and one at the seafront. As I was tired and hurting all over, I only went down at the last stop, as you could grab something to eat on a food truck. Sidewalks at the seafront were mostly wheelchair

accessible (there were some missing curb cuts, so you had to either get up, do a detour or wheel on the road).

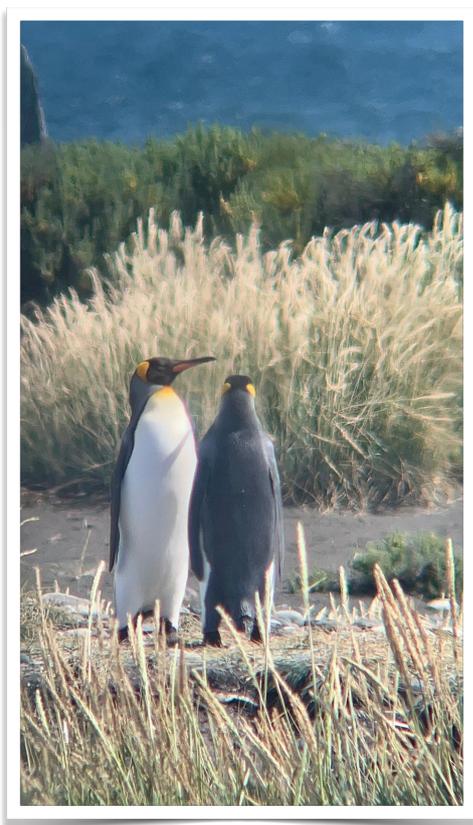


Photo 6. King Penguins as seen from the binoculars.



Photo 7. Me sitting on the beach wheelchair at King Penguin park.

h) 2-hour Ferry across the Magellan strait: you board it from the same ramp that cars use, thus it has those anti-slipping metallic bands that are difficult for manual wheelchairs and impossible for power wheelchairs with lower floors. Then, if you want to go to the passenger decks, there are only stairs (two to three flights of stairs with more than 10 steps each). On the car area, there is a resting room for people with disabilities with an accessible toilet (or at least I was told that) with no view of the sea. If you manage to get to the lower passenger deck (I climbed the stairs crawling on my fours), from the inside of the cabin to the deck there is a ramp. There is also enough space to move around inside the cabin with a wheelchair. Doors, as in all boats, are very heavy and difficult to open.

3. MILODON CAVE (PRIVATE TOUR)

The Milodon Cave is known by the fossils of a Milodon (a huge sloth-like animal) that were found in them. In our case, the visit to the cave was part of a full-day tour of the Torres del Paine area. Personally, I would skip it, as accessibility is not good enough to enjoy it.



Photo 8. The interior of Milodon Cave. A trail with stairs can be seen on the right.

1. Again, the car park has rough terrain with loose pebbles/smaller rocks. There is a wheelchair parking spot next to the paved path that gets you to the ticket office, so, if it is available, you only have a meter or two of bumpy terrain.

2. There is an accessible restroom (see general considerations on the first page of this document) in the ticket and cafeteria area.

3. Unfortunately, the path that leads to the cave has a few issues. Some of it is paved (with rougher, but feasible areas), but most of it is a wooden boardwalk. While up until the last 50 meters most of it is more or less flat, the boards are not at the same level (creating micro steps) and the gaps between them are a bit too wide, so the front wheels (casters) of manual wheelchairs easily get stuck on them making the way tiring



Photo 9. The entrance of Milodon Cave. A steep wooden boardwalk on the right.

and complicated. For power wheelchairs, the way is bumpy. The final stretch of the boardwalk has a few steep inclines. My friend gave up at the second to last incline. They are not long, about 10 meters each incline, but they are too steep for manual wheelchair users and being pushed on bumpy flooring is not comfortable and potentially dangerous.

4. The whole way to the cave is about 250 meters each way.

5. Once you reach the top, the only accessible area in the cave is the entrance, where you have a general view of it. All the pathway that tours the cave (maybe 300 meters more, all in all) has several steps along the way. Sometimes these are single steps, but most of the time they come in sets of 3 to 5 steps. That's only what I could see from the entrance viewpoint, so there may be more.

6. The way down through the steep inclines of the wooden boardwalk is very dangerous. At the steepest, I had to go down and walk backwards with my wheelchair and, on the rest, I needed assistance from our guide slowing the wheelchair down while grabbing its handles.

All in all, it is unfortunate because they made the effort to make the way to the cave accessible, but they did it wrong. If they redid the path with milder inclines and reducing the gap between the boards, which they could without spending a lot of money, it would be way more accessible and the experience would be worth the effort. As it is now, it takes a lot to get to the entrance of the cave and from there you don't get to see much of the interior, which is its main highlight.

4. TORRES DEL PAINE PARK VIEWPOINT TOUR FROM PUERTO NATALES (PRIVATE TOUR)

While the visit to the cave could be skipped, the Torres del Paine National Park is a must for its stunning landscapes, crowned by its mountains and the vastness of it all. Although none of the current viewpoints that we visited have concrete flooring, the views are fantastic, so if you can get on an off a van in any way or have a more accessible private vehicle, go for it.

1. The duration of our tour was about 8 hours.

2. Our van, which we booked through [Torres del Paine Adventures](#), was partially wheelchair accessible. It had a very steep ramp to board from the side. While getting on the van, it still had a step at the end of the ramp, so even if you could manage the steepness of it you still had to overcome that last step. In the end, we didn't use the ramp as it was too steep and we got on and off by climbing the steps with effort. A step stool was missing, which would have helped. We used our wheelchairs as step stools. A good point of the van is that it had enough space in front of the second row seats to carry the wheelchairs without disassembling them. Nevertheless, we could not stay seated on the wheelchairs, as there was no locking system and the road was curvy and bumpy.



Photo 10. Mountain range at Torres del Paine National Park.

3. A huge part of the road (we are talking hours of riding) is bumpy, so the way is tiring and some people may struggle if they have back issues or the likes.

4. The way is also curvy with some steep inclines, so it's better to do it with a driver that knows the area. Ours was very good.

5. All in all, we stopped at 5 or 6 viewpoints. My friend only went down on 2 or 3 due to the physical effort of going up and down the van. Nevertheless, from the car the view was still quite good, although not as good as if you went down.

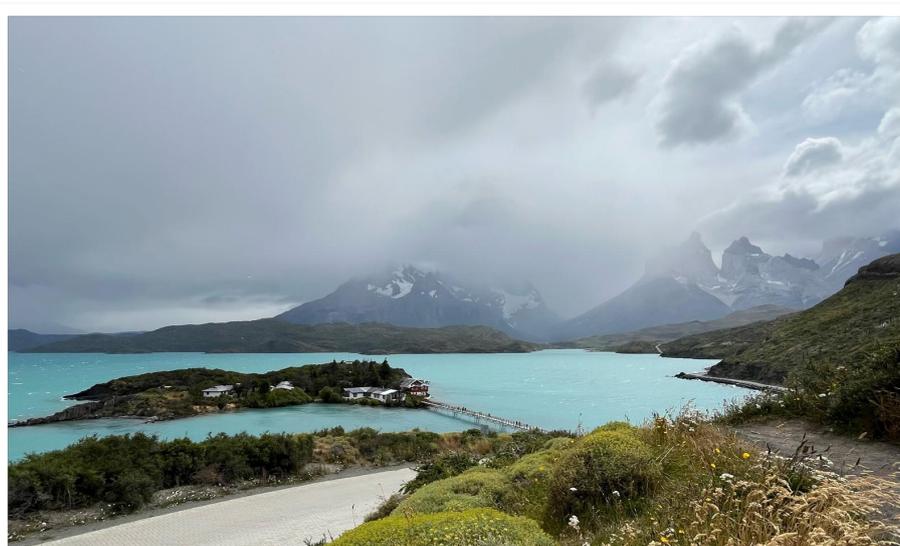


Photo 11. Lake Pehoe as seen from one of the viewpoints.

6. As mentioned, none of the current viewpoints have paved flooring. Most of them are compact dirt with loose pebbles/smaller rocks. Also, most of them are flat, except a couple of them that have steep slopes on uneven terrain to get to the best viewing spots (Lake Tahoe's viewpoint and Paine Waterfall's). For the rest of them, getting to the best viewing spots requires only 2 to 10 meters of walking/wheeling. Also, as mentioned, the view from the car is still rather good.

7. One of the stops (already inside the National Park, as the first stop, which had one of the best views was on a road just before the entrance) was at a camping with an "accessible" restroom (see comment on the first page). We ate the lunch that we had brought there, as there were no places to eat or buy food on the way.



Photo 12. Perito Moreno's glacier as seen from the boat.

5. PERITO MORENO GLACIER FROM PUERTO NATALES (GROUP TOUR)

Perito Moreno Glacier is a sight to behold and one of the most wonderful places where I have been. The trip from Puerto Natales is long, about 5 and a half hours of driving each way (plus the time at border controls and about 2 hours at Perito Moreno), but it is definitely worth it if you can manage the accessibility issues or if you have a more accessible private vehicle. Also, if you can, I recommend taking the optional navigation, as you get a different perspective on the glacier from way up close.

1. All in all, the tour was around 15 hours long.

2. The bus is a regular highway bus (with all its steps) and it is not wheelchair accessible. It does have space to store wheelchairs in the trunk, though taller wheelchairs may have to be stored sideways, which is not recommended for some power wheelchairs.

3. Besides getting on and off the bus, which involves 5 or 6 high steps, all border stops (4 in total) require to walk or roll on uneven ground full of small pebbles/rocks.

Distance depends on where the bus can park (i.e. how long is the queue for the border control), but it ranged between 10 to 40 meters each way. There are access ramps at one of the entrances of each border control (Chilean and Argentinian), but they are in extremely poor condition, as there is missing concrete and plenty of cracks on them rendering them unusable for many power wheelchairs and quite dangerous for others. Going in person to the control is mandatory, so no one can pass it for you.

4. Once at Perito Moreno, there is an accessible restroom at the ground level of the cafeteria and also, and most important, a wheelchair accessible itinerary on the walkways or “pasarelas” to different observation points, which is quite good, as it is long and you have good views from it. However, it is a bit steep to go back up for manual wheelchair users (on the way to the accessible viewpoints, walkways go downhill).

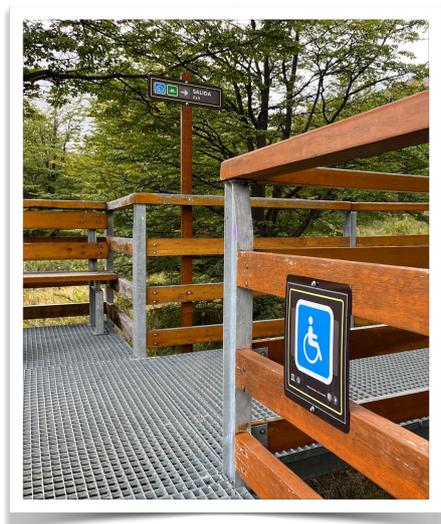


Photo 13. Accessible walkways.



Photo 14. The glacier as seen from the accessible walkways.

5. Walkways are metallic, which may become slippery if it rains. This may especially affect manual wheelchairs with power assist devices or people with reduced mobility.

6. The one hour optional boat navigation is not wheelchair accessible (about 15 steps in total split in two different sections), but feasible if you can manage steps, as you can stay at the lower outer deck and avoid the narrow stairs either to the cabin or to the upper deck. The view from the lower deck is very good from a wheelchair’s height, so no worries there.

7. On the way down to the boat (and later to get back), there is also a very steep 20 meter slope. The guide helped me brake the wheelchair while going down and later pushed me while going up.

8. As my wheelchair is lightweight, the guide and fellow travelers also helped me carry it over the stairs and on to the boat.



Photo 15. The Northern wall of the glacier as seen from the boat.

9. Finally, if you wanted to pay by credit for the boat navigation, there was an extra stop with the bus at the ticketing area, so you had to get on an off the bus once more. Otherwise, you could pay by cash (either in Chilean or Argentinian pesos) inside the bus, as the guide later bought the tickets for everyone.



Photo 16. Me at Perito Moreno's glacier.

6. BALMACEDA AND SERRANO GLACIERS' NAVIGATION (GROUP TOUR)

These two glaciers are located within the Chilean Fjords and can only be reached by boat. During the navigation, you get to see cormorants and, if you're lucky, you may spot seals, condors and other wildlife. Besides the glaciers, the landscape during the trip

is beautiful, with waterfalls and cliffs right next to the sea. In terms of effort and reward, it is one of the most pleasant activities that we did.

1. Again, the van that gets you to the boat from the hotel is not wheelchair accessible, although there was a step stool that helped us get on it. We disassembled the wheelchairs and put them on the copilot's seat.

2. This time, to board the boat, the plank was wider, smooth (no metallic anti-slipping bands protruding) and level with the boat. There was only one step to get on and off the plank on each side, which made boarding easier than on previous boats.

3. Unfortunately, the exterior side aisles or corridors were also too narrow for a wheelchair to pass. Boarding was from the side of the boat, so it was necessary to walk about 10 meters of the corridor. Again, as the corridor is very narrow, no one can effectively help you walk the distance and lifting someone would be very dangerous as water is just nearby.

4. At later stops (one at Serrano's glacier and the other at Estancia Perales to have lunch), boarding and disembarking was done from the rear deck, so we did not have to walk again the aisle those times. Still, the plank had a step to get on and off.

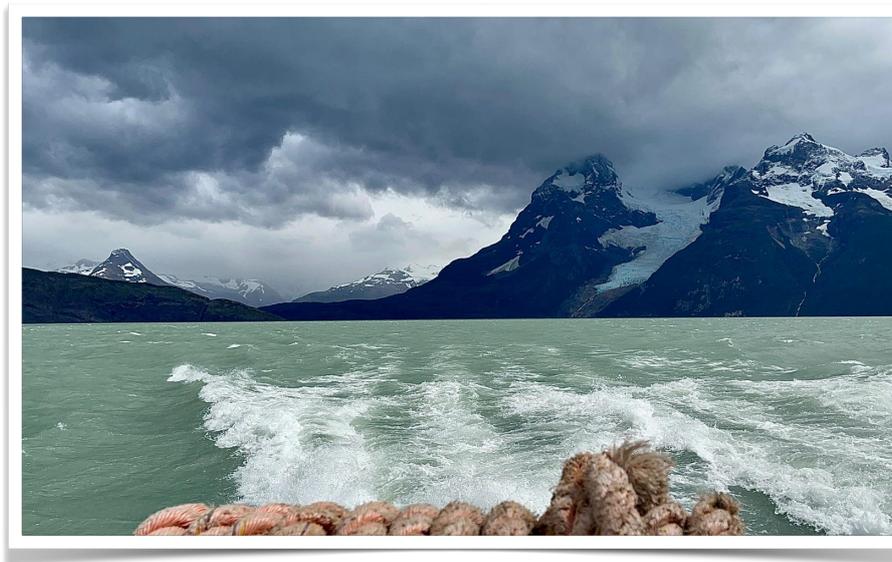


Photo 17. Balmaceda's glacier, the fjords and the sea near Puerto Natales.

5. From the rear deck, to access the cabin there is a small step that could be easily sorted with a small ramp. I had to get off and on the wheelchair to go over the step each time. My friend, who has more arm power, could do it by himself.

6. Inside the cabin, there are no accessible toilets.

7. Inside the cabin, the only place that we could stay with our wheelchairs was in front of the bar and toilet area. From that area, you barely see the windows and you

cannot see any of the wildlife that you may encounter during the trip. There was no seating or reserved space for wheelchairs either.

8. At first, as the sea was a bit rough, during navigation we were made to sit on regular seats (this time window seats, important when you're not tall), which for non-standard bodies, are way more uncomfortable than our wheelchairs.

9. Luckily, once the sea calmed down, we were allowed to stay outside the boat most of the time. The view from there was fantastic and we were able to enjoy most of the highlights, although initially we had to fight with the rest of the passengers to get to the front, as everyone was standing in front of us and we couldn't see anything. Later on, people understood it and let us pass. A message through the loudspeakers at the beginning or during the tour or assistance from the crew could be of help in that regard.

10. Accessibility at both stops is as follows:

a) Serrano Glacier: after getting off the boat, there is a jetty made of concrete with a huge step (more than 30cm) in the middle of it with a makeshift ramp of flexible material to bridge it that no wheelchair could traverse without lifting it. Afterwards, there is a wooden boardwalk of about 200-300 meters that leads to the lower viewpoint. The view from there is closer and better than from the boat. The boardwalk path, although it is mostly flat, has similar problems to the boardwalk at Milodon's Cave. Boards are a bit uneven, making the way bumpy and front wheels (casters) easy to trip, and gaps between them too big. Actually, when I turned around to go back to the boat, my wheels got stuck horizontally between the boards and I nearly fell. My friend stayed on the boat because he was tired of boardwalks.



Photo 18. Exterior corridor on the port side of the boat.

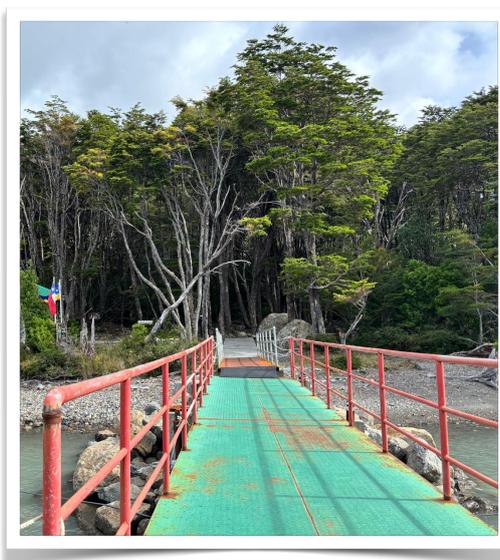


Photo 19. Jetty to Serrano's glacier island.

b) Estancia Perales: after getting of the boat, to reach the restaurant we got on a pick-up van, not wheelchair accessible, but better than trying to wheel the 100 meter stony road. Getting on and off the pick-up was difficult due to its height, but the crew lifted us. The restaurant itself was wheelchair accessible and it also had an accessible toilet.

11. During the whole trip, the crew and the van drivers helped us carry our wheelchairs on all of the transfers and gave us a hand when needed (and there was enough space to do so; everywhere except for the exterior lateral corridor of the boat).

12. Finally, the view of Balmaceda's glacier from the rear deck of the boat was very good. Actually, if you decide to stay on the boat the whole trip and you just get off at the restaurant, the views that you get during the whole journey are already worth it.



Photo 20. Me at Serrano's glacier.

7. NAVIMAG FERRY FROM PUERTO NATALES TO PUERTO MONTT

A good way to end your vacation at the Patagonia and rest a bit, may be to take the NaviMag ferry from Puerto Natales to Puerto Montt, a 4-day journey with barely any signal, perfect to immerse yourself in the magical landscapes of the fjords. Along the way, you may get to spot otters, seals, whales, among other mammals and sea birds.

1. If you plan on taking it, though, you should leave it for the end of your trip, as sometimes, due to bad weather there are substantial delays. In our case, we boarded a day and a half later than expected and had to find a place for the extra night in Puerto Natales (we stayed at Hotel Costanera, a wheelchair accessible hotel, near the Navimag check-in area, but far from the city center, where it is more convenient to stay if you're spending a few days in town).

2. It is also important to note that the ship is not a cruise, but a cargo ferry with cabins for up to 150 passengers. Therefore, don't expects lots of entertainment on board or lots of dishes to choose from. Nevertheless, food is good quality and tasty.

They take into account food allergies and have vegetarian options, if you tell them in advance.



Photo 21. Prow deck of Navimag's ferry.

3. Among cabins, number 515 is wheelchair accessible with a good roll-in shower. However, we were not able to stay there, as there is only a bunk bed and, as we were two wheelchair users, we needed two lower beds. For the same price, they accommodated us on a regular room (with 2 bunk beds, thus 2 lower ones) and let us use the accessible room to shower. There is also another accessible restroom, this one public, on level 6.

4. On the ship, on a wheelchair you can move among decks 5 and 6. There is an elevator on the dining area that goes from level 5 to 6. The only issues are a mini-step of 5cm to access the elevator on level 5 and the elevator doors (as well as all doors in the ship) being heavy and difficult to open. Nevertheless, crew members were very attentive and willing to help at all times. They also helped us during all the buffet style meals (carrying the trays and everything that was needed).

5. Finally, to get from the indoor areas (dining room, upper cafeteria and cabins) to the outer decks, most doors, besides being hard to open, have a 20cm step. Nevertheless, some of the doors on each level have a smaller step of about 5cm. We always used these doors to get in and out. Again, aside from great crew members, passengers were also friendly, so, as long as your wheelchair is capable of going over a 5cm step, you should be ok. They could easily put a small ramp on the outer side of these steps on decks 5 and 6, so for heavier electric wheelchairs, if you contact in advance, this may be an option for you.

6. Keep in mind that, even if most of the way is navigated within the fjords, thus waters tend to be calmer, there is an open ocean stretch of about 12 hours where the sea can get rough. During that time, you cannot take the elevator and, if you tend to get sea-sick, you should take some anti-sickness pills with you (you can also get them on the cafeteria). Also, be ready for potential wind and rain, as in all the Patagonia.

7. Not related to accessibility, if the weather is good and the sky is clear, you can have a great look at the stars and the southern sky from the stern deck on level 6 (the one to the back of the ship).



Photo 22. Flat sea and fjords on a rainy day, as seen from the ferry.

8. MAIN CITIES

Following is a small accessibility review for travelers with disabilities of the main Patagonian cities, Punta Arenas and Puerto Natales. As an extra, Santiago de Chile is also included, as you will most probably fly from there.

In the Patagonia, even if there is a nationwide law stating that all hotels above 10 rooms should have at least one that is accessible, it is very difficult to even find one that is step-free, as there are no bigger hotel chains as in Santiago, so try to book way in advance. Nevertheless, during our trip, as we contacted hotels beforehand, some offered to put ramps in place to save said steps. Getting into bathrooms was a whole other story, though, as even if rooms were step-free, doors to the bathroom were still narrow. It seems that it will be improving in the following years, but contact hotels in advance and check all the accessibility details that you may need.

Punta Arenas

In front of the Magellan Strait, Punta Arenas is the capital of the region with a population of over 100,000. It is windy in summer, like most of the Patagonia as winds come from the Pacific to the Atlantic, and extremely cold in winter with regular snowfall.

All the city is downhill towards the sea. From the city center (around Plaza de Armas) to the sea, the incline is mostly mild and manageable for strong manual wheelchair pushers. However, from Plaza the Armas towards Cerro de la Cruz it gets way steeper. The good news is that, while in the city, you don't need to move much from the center as there are plenty of restaurants and hotels around.

As for sidewalks, there are curb-cuts throughout the city and maintenance is quite good in the city center. However, the farther you get from there, the worse it gets, with uneven pavement and the occasional missing or high curb-cut. In winter, ice and snow covers most sidewalks.



Photo 23. Punta Arenas as seen from Cerro de la Cruz viewpoint.

Finally, restaurants and shops are a bit of a hit or miss in terms of accessible entrances. In the city center about 30-40% of restaurants have step-free entrances (for shops I would say that it's a bit less), so, even if you're looking for something specific, as there are many options, you should be ok. However, don't expect to find any accessible restrooms at restaurants.

Regarding transportation, as in all Chile, at the time of writing this document (February 2025) there are no accessible taxis. Buses in the city do have ramps to board, though.

As for tourist attractions, the Sara Braun Cemetery is the place that everyone talks about. To get there you will have to either take the bus or walk a kilometer and a half from the city center. Sidewalks near the place get complicated and you may need to hit the road sometimes. Once at the cemetery, the pathways are compact dirt paths. The other main sightseeing spot is Cerro de la Cruz's viewpoint that overlooks the city. The only ways to get there are via lots of stairs or by doing a long detour through steep streets (Avenida de la Independencia using the curvy cycling lane in the middle, then turning on Arauco street and, finally, at Alameda Manuel Señoret is the easiest way if you are adventurous).

Puerto Natales

In the middle of the Chilean fjords, Puerto Natales is a small city, with a bit more than 20,000 citizens, that lives mostly out of tourism during the summer months. As in Punta Arenas, be ready for the wind and the occasional rain while being there.

The city center near Plaza de Armas is mostly flat and it's the place to be. Outside the central area there aren't many restaurants and moving around also becomes more complicated, as streets get steeper both towards the sea and also in the opposite direction. Sidewalks are also quite good in the center, with curb-cuts and smooth pavement (with the occasional hole), but they get rougher and steeper 2 to 5 blocks away from Plaza de Armas (depending on the direction).



Photo 24. Bay of Puerto Natales.

Regarding restaurants and shops, the scene is a bit more complicated than in Punta Arenas, as I would say that not even 20% are step-free (luckily, the main supermarket, Unimarc, is). Most of them have 1 to 3 steps at the entrance of varying height. Nevertheless, there are many to choose from, so eventually you will find one that is step-free. As in Punta Arenas, accessible restrooms in restaurants are extremely uncommon.

As for transportation, there are no accessible taxis and we did not see any accessible in-town buses either, although the area that you will walk around shouldn't be big, so it shouldn't be too much of an issue.

Finally, aside from all the activities that leave from Puerto Natales (check the previous sections of the document), there is nothing much to do in town. A stretch of the sea-front is wheelchair accessible, about 200-300 meters starting from the intersection with Manuel Bulnes street towards the north.

Santiago de Chile

In the middle of the country, more or less at the same latitude as other major South American capitals like Buenos Aires and Montevideo, you can find Santiago de Chile with a population of about 6 million people. In summer, the weather is hot and dry, easily reaching temperatures of 30°C during the day.

The best and safest areas to stay in the city are either Providencia or Las Condes. Both of them have plenty of restaurants, shopping malls and other services, so, besides being safe, they are a good option overall. In these areas, finding accessible accommodation is not an issue, as there are plenty of international hotel chains with accessible rooms.



Photo 25. Statues carved from wood at the Pre-Columbine Art Museum.

Regarding transportation, most of the subway system is wheelchair accessible, with modern elevators at the time of the review. Either the beginning or the end of the platform has step-free access to board the metro. From Providencia, you can get to Santiago's downtown via Los Leones or Tobalaba station, both accessible, and go down at Universidad de Chile to visit La Moneda, Plaza de Armas and some museums or at Universidad Católica if you plan on strolling around Lastarria neighborhood. You should watch your belongings and not stay after sunset at downtown, Lastarria and other areas in the city, besides Providencia and Las Condes.

In-city buses are also wheelchair accessible by means of ramps, but we never got to try them as we only used the subway. As in the rest of Chile, there are no accessible taxis either.

On a side note, when it comes to flying locally within Chile to and from Santiago, we were very pleased with the way that Latam Airlines handled accessibility. Both the check-in process for wheelchair users, as well as how they took care of our wheelchairs during the flight and how fast they brought them to the finger when getting off the plane. It's true that when we got to Santiago from Spain, they didn't bring our wheelchairs to the plane at first, but it was not Latam Airlines and it was an issue with our airline not tagging our wheelchairs properly. Nothing to do with the airport that, otherwise, during our 4 internal flights was fantastic.

As for streets in the city, at relevant areas for tourists they are mostly flat, except for the Cerro San Cristóbal area. Most sidewalks have curb-cuts, but maintenance is not

good, so even if a sidewalk looks good, you should keep an eye on the ground as missing tiles and holes are common. Also, many curb-cuts are not at 0-level, so be careful when crossing.

Regarding restaurants and shops, many of them have either step-free entrances or ramps to access (I would say that about half of them). However, many of the ramps are a bit steep and may be dangerous for some wheelchair users. As for accessible restrooms, they are common in museums and shopping malls.

In terms of sightseeing, the city doesn't have much to offer in comparison to other capitals, but, as it will most probably be your landing spot, it may be worth going to La Moneda Palace for its history (and the surrounding area towards Plaza de Armas) and exploring the Pre-Columbine Art Museum to learn more about the region's native culture. Both places are wheelchair accessible, although information signs at the Pre-Columbine Art Museum are a bit high, have small lettering and are dim-lit, so reading them is complicated. Another popular spot is Lastarria's neighborhood. Many streets there are paved with uneven cobblestone, so the stroll is not as pleasant as it looks like.

Finally, if you want to have good views of the city, you may go up South America's tallest skyscraper named Sky Costanera, located at Providencia, or go up the cable car to Cerro San Cristóbal. Sky Costanera is completely wheelchair accessible. Apparently, the cable car is also, but we didn't get to try it.

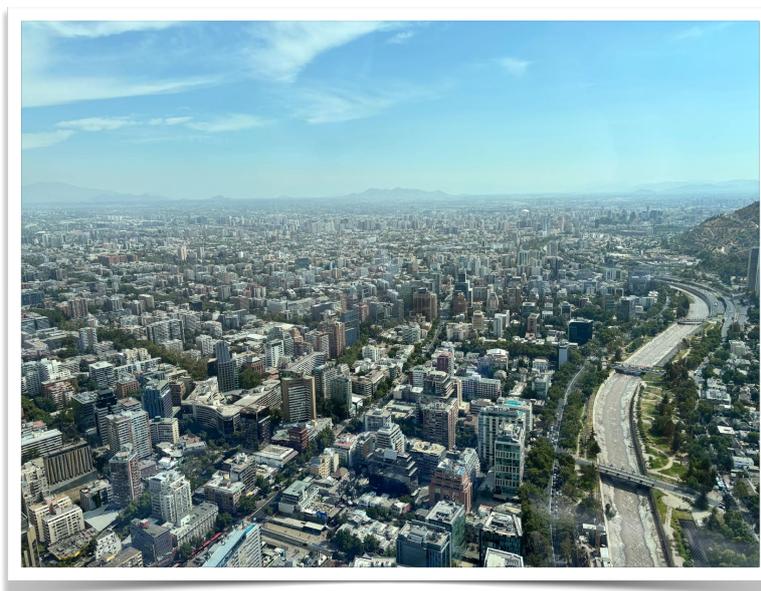


Photo 26. Eagle-eye view of Santiago from Sky Costanera's skyscraper.

Review written by

AT+ Chairman

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