

General Information Package for bicycling in Tierra del Fuego and Patagonia

The country and the best traveling time

Tierra del Fuego is a large island at the southern tip of South America. From there it is not too far to Cape Horn, the southern most island of South America, and to the Antarctic Peninsula. Patagonia is a term referring to the southern part of mainland South America, made up by the southern parts of Chile and Argentina. The language spoken is Spanish. The southern part of Tierra del Fuego has a climate similar to Scandinavia or coastal Alaska. Summers are moist and rather cool, winters have lots of snow but are not extremely cold. The best time for traveling is during fall (February to April), because during this time the weather is more stable and it is not raining too much. The wind, however, never stops. This is especially apparent if one crosses the mountain range of Tierra del Fuego to the northern part of the island towards Patagonia. The main wind direction is from the north-west. If possible one should take this into account when planning a tour! The northern part of Tierra del Fuego consists of grassland (Pampa) similarly to eastern Patagonia. The grassland evolved due to the dry climate on the east side of the Andean Mountain Range in the western part of Patagonia. In the grassland regions, roads are often straight, and then one is very much exposed to the wind. Forests can only be found in the Andean Mountain Range and in the southern part of Tierra del Fuego. The closer one approaches the Andes, the more forests, lakes and streams. The relative vicinity to two oceans makes the weather conditions rather unpredictable. Sudden changes in weather are possible at all times. The continuous winds are fhn winds usually causing clear skies on the east side of the Andes, but one has to really fix the tent even under blue sky!

General information

Everyone cycling in Patagonia should bring some experience. The "end of the world" bears a lot of physical and mental challenges for bicyclists (especially the continuous wind). Also a longer tour requires some logistic skills, since distances between towns can be quite large in the Patagonian grasslands. A full toolkit is as important as a good first aid kit, especially when cycling in regions away from the Panamerican Highway.

Planning the itinerary

Good topographic maps of the region are rare due to some fights between Argentina and Chile in the region of Patagonia. However, good road maps can be obtained in both countries in supermarkets or gas stations. One important factor for planning is the north-western direction of the wind. We had planned our trip from south to north due to a rather late start in the season and thus chose Ushuaia as a starting point to not having to experience it in the first snow of the season. On bad days the wind made cycling impossible.

In addition, except for the Panamerican Highway, not all roads are sealed and the gravel roads can be quite hard to ride due to corrogation and bad surface condition. In 1995, the sealed Panamerican Highway ended about 35 km north of Ushuaia (by now it may be finished?). Ushuaia is actually a nice town, and a famous place to start or finish a bicycle tour.

A bicycle tour in Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego should definitively be combined with a few days of hiking in the famous National Parks (Tierra del Fuego, Torres del Paine, Moreno Glacier, Fitz Roy). The forests are just too impressive to pass them.

Equipment

The bike should be very robust. It is not necessary to use a mountain bike, but the 26" tires may be more suitable for riding on the tracks. Especially the rims and tires will have to withstand strong forces. It is especially recommended to use tires with a broad profile if the tour is planned mainly on tracks and gravel roads. If one plans to ride a lot on paved roads, then more skinny tires are suitable (semi-slick, or a road tire with good profile). Spare innertubes are useful, because tracks often have quit large rocks which may quickly cause snake-bites if one hits the too fast. Using the Rohloff Speedhub 500/14 (<http://www.rohloff.de>) makes riding much more comfortable and requires significantly less service in sand and dirt. A suspension fork is recommended, but only in combination with a front rack that is compatible (e.g. von Faiv, <http://www.faiv.de>). A suspended seat post will make riding on rough tracks more comfortable. Ergonomic grips are useful to prevent numbness of the fingers.

Camping

In Patagonia, the wind is the main determinant of the distance on can travel per day (especially if it is head wind!). Often villages, public campgrounds or estancias do not have the distance of a days trip on

bike. Bringing a tent makes the cyclist more independent of villages and farms (estancias). Wild camping is working quite well, even when the land is fenced. And it is the cheapest way of traveling. There is no danger of "wild" animals, only black flies or mosquitoes can be quite annoying.

Getting there and away

Those riding south to north (like us) are making a mistake – rather let the wind take you from north to south. It is possible to cycle to Patagonia from Buenos Aires or Santiago del Chile. If one does not want to cycle all that way, public buses or trains allow to travel further south before starting the tour. In addition there are inland flights from both cities to more southern towns (Argentina: Ushuaia, Rio Gallegos, Chile: Puerto Natales, Punta Arenas). On the Chilean side of the Andes, there is a ferry leading from Perto Montt to Perto Cicnes, Perto Aisen, and Puerto Natales. It must be a worthwhile trip through impressive fjords.

More information

There is a very good book about cycling in South America: Lateinamerika BikeBuch (Raphaela Wieggers, ReiseKnowHow Verlag); sorry, I guess there are English ones as well? Apart from that, there are a number of books available about Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego in general. In addition, the internet is full of bicycling pages about South America and Patagonia. There is a exchange forum for bicyclists on our website <http://www.mountainbike-expedition-team.de>!

For those who like to experience wild forests, glaciers, lakes and rolling steppes under constantly blue sky with spectacular clouds, Patagonia is certainly a rewarding place for bicycling.