The CARRETERA AUSTRAL

South America’s Most Spectacular Road

Autumn in Aisén: brightly colored leaves and the first snow on Cerro Castillo.
Everything in this southern continent has been effected on a grand scale . . .

—Charles Darwin
Nature is the art of God.

—Dante Alighieri

El Salto Falls on the Rio Pollux in spring, the season of wildflowers and rushing water.
Perhaps the margin of the globe is Patagonia. It is the world’s poetic refuge . . .

—Chris Moss
The inanimate works of nature—rock, ice, snow, wind, water—all warring with each other yet combined against man—here reigned with absolute sovereignty.

—Charles Darwin
... all the attending marvels of a thousand Patagonian sights and sounds helped sway me to my wish.

—Herman Melville
At last, Patagonia! How often had I pictured in imagination, wishing with an intense longing to visit this solitary wilderness . . .

—William Henry Hudson
The Carretera Austral, or “Southern Highway,” begins in Puerto Montt, capital of Chile’s 10th Region, or “Lakes Region.” From there it runs south across the province of Palena, and through Chile’s 11th Region, Aisén, for more than 1,200 kilometers. It connects Chaitén, the capital of Palena, with Colháiique, the capital of Aisén, and Cochrane, capital of the province of Capitán Prat, before reaching Puerto Yungay in the far south of the region. Here a ferry crossing lets one continue south to the outlet of the Río Pascua into Fiordo Steele. The Carretera itself continues southeast to Villa O’Higgins and Bahía Bahamondes, both located at the northern end of the easternmost arm of Lago O’Higgins—a lake shared between Chile and Argentina (and known as Lago San Martín on the Argentine side). To complete this long and important road, one final section of approximately 90 kilometers is needed between Pichanco and Caleta Gonzalo in Palena Province.

The Carretera Austral provides the main north–south access to western Chilean Patagonia, between 41°28’ and 47°56’ south latitude. This road is the principal window that lets one appreciate a territory of still pristine ecosystems and remarkably diverse landforms. A landscape characterized by lakes, mountains, rivers, glaciers, forests (in some areas damaged by large fires), rivers, ice fields, and volcanoes, many still active. Here the young history of the first settlers confronts new contemporary initiatives for development and exploitation of the region, generating controversies amongst the inhabitants of the territory as well as those who, from a distance, see Patagonia as a very precious place.

Starting in the early twentieth century, the region from Puerto Montt to the extreme southern part of Aisén underwent what can only be called a process of “colonization.” The early settlers,
or colonos, faced the challenge of living in an unexplored region, in a harsh climate, far from normal amenities, all of which contributed to the formation of a strong bond with the land they were settling. Small settlements became towns that needed to be connected. And so the demand grew for the construction of a road network that would link all of Patagonia. Slowly attention focused on the creation of a north–south road that would unite this extended territory, as road advocates liked to say, “with Chile.”

Today most people reach this territory by air, and most cargo is transported here by sea or, alternatively, by road through Argentina. Providing physical access to the province of Palena and the larger region of Aisén has been an ongoing issue in the growth and development of the country. Each new administration, with its own vision and policies, has taken up the task, consolidating earlier projects and adding others to advance the construction of a road network through this little-known area, an extremely mountainous territory of few inhabitants. Road projects here invariably presented major challenges in their design, construction, and maintenance when compared with those in the center of the country.

A variety of visions have been proposed for providing better access between Puerto Montt and Palena and Aisén. At one time, the main idea was to consolidate and improve maritime transport along the coast, and along with that to create transverse or lateral road connections from the Argentine border to the sea. Eventually, to strengthen border claims within the territory, geopolitical and administrative considerations tipped the scale in favor of a main north–south road with its own series of east–west lateral roads, integrating and improving existing tracks and roadways. Slowly the plan developed in response to the need to access different valleys in order to facilitate the occupation and population of the territory.

The concept of a road system composed of a main north–south axis with various lateral connections was developed in the late 1970s, mainly based upon earlier surveys done in the 1960s looking for the best way to connect Puerto Montt with Coihaique. The main difference was in the sector around La Junta. The original route of the Carretera Austral from this point had turned east, through the Claro Solar Valley to Lago Verde, then continued south toward La Tapera, eventually turning back west along the Río Cisnes valley to ultimately connect with the existing road from Manihuales to Puerto Aisén and Coihaique. The final road, however, took a more direct line south, linking La Junta, Puyuhuapi, Queulat, and Cisne Medio.

Thus the final route for building the Carretera Austral, el Camino longitudinal Austral, was the following: Puerto Montt – Fiordo Reloncaví – Hornopirén – Fiordo Comau – Fiordo Renihue – Chaitén – La Junta – Puyuhuapi – Cisne Medio – Coihaique – Villa Cerro Castillo – Puerto Río Tranquilo – Cochrane – Fiordo Mitchell (Puerto Yungay) – Fiordo Steele. Inevitably the connecting lateral roads followed valleys that had the greatest productive potential and permitted the best access between the eastern frontier and the coast.

The construction of the Carretera Austral allowed many more people to experience the remarkable landscape of Chilean Patagonia. Landscape is partly a “cultural creation.” The needs and local knowledge of communities give form
It involves both national and local authorities, as well other economic and social stakeholders, and organizations dedicated to the use, care, and protection of the environment, especially those that have focused on management practices related to tourism.

Balancing the interaction of public and private entities in a fragile and still wild territory like western Patagonia is a permanent challenge. Projects currently under way to pave the dirt-and-gravel sections of the Carretera by 2017, especially between Puerto Montt and Coihaique, together with implementing a system of ferries across three fjords—Reloncaví, Comau and Reñihué—will be an important test. Recognizing that the road itself forms part of the landscape—and that it must be perceived and appreciated as such—is the first challenge. Strict road-building standards, careful and thorough monitoring of design and construction, as well as landscape conservation during construction, are all important. The goal is, and will continue to be, the integration of ecological, aesthetic, and cultural values into the design, construction, and operation of these roads. Chilean Patagonia has so many special qualities that a road here must do more than simply provide access. Rather it should be a window through which local citizens and visitors from across the globe can enjoy the countryside from the road itself. Better yet, the Carretera should be a doorway that invites the traveler to engage in recreational activities set amidst nature at its most pristine. The images in this book provide proof that there are ample opportunities to experience this incredible landscape, all along South America’s most scenic highway.
Roads have long been the leading edge of civilization—the means of expansion for human settlement, allowing transport for commerce, and facilitators of cultural exchange. During the modern era road networks have multiplied exponentially around the globe. In a crowded and overdeveloped world, new road construction is no longer viewed uncritically as a social benefit in every instance. Roads proposed to penetrate the last remaining wild areas have become increasingly controversial.

Chile’s Carretera Austral, or “southern road,” has certainly generated controversy through the years. Stretching from the vibrant city of Puerto Montt on Chile’s southern coast through the fjordland of Continental Chiloé, then extending through the Aisén Region of Patagonia to end at the northern tip of the Southern Continental ice field, the road’s construction and expansion has been a focal point for polemics on Chile’s rural development policies. This long-running debate encompasses various social, ecological, and cultural themes and will likely continue for decades to come, and perhaps never be fully settled. What is beyond dispute is the fact that the Carretera Austral traverses some of the most spectacular country on Earth, a landscape of scenic wonders populated by people rightly proud of their cultural heritage.

The idea of designating the Carretera Austral a national scenic highway—with the kind of coordinated signage, maintenance protocols, and aesthetic standards that accompany such a designation—is a compelling one. There are hundreds of designated scenic roads around the world (Chile’s first was in Pumalin Park, officially declared in the 1990s when Ricardo Lagos was minister of public works in the Frei administration). They generally become magnets for tourism and the best ones become tourist attractions in their own
right. The goal, of course, is not maximum speed between two points, but maximum enjoyment and pleasure for the motorist. If the Carretera Austral were granted scenic highway status and it were properly marketed, it would quickly become one of the most coveted destinations for adventurous travelers from everywhere around the Earth.

The Carretera Austral began as part trail, part cattle track through pure wilderness. As time marched forward the road became more and more defined. Eventually, in the 1970s, the military regime under General Augusto Pinochet took on the task of formally surveying the route and began awarding construction work to private and military contractors, which built a great deal of its 1,200-kilometer length. Today, sections of the road are constantly being upgraded; the original track through the frontier has become a well-used highway, still largely having a dirt or gravel surface but now paved in some sections. The national government is committed to paving the entire route and finishing the so-called missing link—the difficult unfinished section in Palena Province—either by building a terrestrial route through the mountains or by completing a shorter, coastal route that links existing roads with efficient ferry service. (That remains a contentious issue.)

The focus of this book, however, is not on the Carretera Austral’s history, current condition, or politics but on the landscape of southern Chile that it opens to the traveler. The reader is introduced to this terrain through the extraordinary photography of Linde Waidhofer, who lives part of the year on Lago General Carrera in Aisén. Over the course of several years, through every season, Linde has been photographing the magnificent views along the road, which include a string of national parks and reserves that are among the most stunning protected areas on the planet.

The mountains, lakes, rivers, waterfalls, forests, wetlands, and small farms of southern Chile are not of any ordinary ilk. A traveler to Patagonia, a region of legendary wilderness and beauty, will find the experience transformative. Here is a landscape of unparalleled natural treasures, one of the last great strongholds of wild nature.

Although Patagonia is commonly thought to be in Argentina (and in surface area the Patagonian region is 95 percent Argentine), the lesser-known Chilean Patagonia has dazzling beauty of its own and a distinctive ecology that differs from the more arid grasslands east of the Andean Cordillera in Argentina. The Carretera Austral is the overland portal to this region’s special beauty and drama, which has an aesthetic impact on every visitor.

This book is not a travelogue or guide to tourist amenities, but it has been specifically designed as a visual tour to show the magnificence of countryside along what is surely one of the world’s most dramatic roads. And it is an invitation to come visit to see it in person for a once-in-a-lifetime experience. The book is organized simply to allow the reader a pictorial ride from north to south, oriented by the maps in each section.

A traveler on the Carretera Austral should have an eye for beauty and, if possible, time to enjoy all its features. Plan a day or two for a weather break. More than six meters, or twenty feet, of rain falls annually in some of parts of Chilean Patagonia, and no visit to the region will be complete without at least a little experience of its rainy incarnation. If two weeks can be spared at a minimum, the traveler will have options to also take any number of side trips up lateral valleys or out to coastal communities on the Pacific Ocean.

There are ample inns and hosterías along the way, and even some good restaurants in unlikely places. Gas stations are conveniently spaced and tire and mechanical service is available within reasonable distances. Bicyclists from around the world will be found here mostly in summer, and students hitchhiking, and a modest number of trucks bringing products to the south or returning north with cattle and sheep. The landscape is lightly populated, but there is ample evidence of human settlement. Numerous parklands are along the highway, and many Chilean and international campers will be found exploring them from October to April. Although most travel by tourists along the Carretera Austral occurs during the warmer months, there is no reason a visitor cannot travel year-round. Winters are particularly beautiful, as are the changing leaves of fall in the Aisén Region on the southern half of the road.

So, take the trip through these pages as a preview of what you will see when you visit southern Chile via the Carretera Austral, which can only be judged a world-class highway—not for the speed of the auto travel but for the quality of the experience. The road merits being officially designated by the Chilean government as a national scenic highway, for that is just what it is.
Humans are born travelers. Even a cursory review of our species’ history leads to the conclusion that wanderlust is deeply encoded in our DNA. Beyond the fundamental needs of food, shelter, and companionship, there are few traits so central to the human condition as the desire to see the vistas on the other side of the mountain and learn about the people there. Setting out on the open road must be a cross-cultural compulsion because so much of humanity’s artistic expression, from ancient mythology to present-day popular entertainment, recounts tales of travel.

Early humans followed trails made by wildlife and went wandering in search of food, mates, or adventure (or perhaps a combination of the three). Those initial game trails became walking paths and then roads suitable for carts pulled by domesticated animals. Constructed, hard-scape roads stretch back some six thousand years, but the modern era’s exponentially expanding road networks sprang from a demographic phenomenon—the explosive growth in the human population—and the proliferation of the automobile. The American industrialist Henry Ford made the “horseless carriage” affordable to the masses through his manufacturing innovations; Ford laid the foundation for today’s
near-universal desire for car ownership, from Mumbai to Patagonia.

The automobile offered a level of personal mobility unprecedented in human history. It also opened an era of recreational motoring that coincided with the early national parks movement. The first director of the national park system in the United States advanced that trend by promoting road building within and between national parks.

One early example of national park-related philanthropy supported road beautification in Yellowstone National Park, the world’s first. John D. Rockefeller Jr., son of the founder of the Standard Oil Company, visited Yellowstone by automobile with several of his children in 1924; during his tour of the park Rockefeller was troubled by the unsightly stumps and downed timber littering the roadsides. Through the rest of the 1920s he personally funded the roadside cleanup efforts in Yellowstone, which set the aesthetic standard for national park road policies in the decades that followed. Today the John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Memorial Parkway connects Yellowstone and Grand Teton national parks in Wyoming; the road is part of America’s national park system.

Perhaps surprisingly, the most-visited part of America’s national park system is not one of the iconic parks such as Yellowstone or Yosemite, but the Blue Ridge Parkway, a 470-mile (556-kilometer) scenic road in the Southern Appalachian Mountains whose construction began as a jobs program during the global economic recession of the 1930s.

The roots of modern “ecotourism” stretch back to the era when affluent individuals traveled to see natural and cultural wonders via rail or ship. With the rise of a significant middle class in developing nations and the expansion of leisure time among workers of average income, auto-based travel became a mass phenomenon and with it a movement arose to establish “scenic roads.” These routes were not designed to move traffic as quickly as possible between points, but to make the trip a leisurely, pleasant experience with frequent roadside rest areas placed strategically to frame the best views.

An Idea Spreads

The two gentlemen, an engineer and a landscape architect, who designed America’s original designated scenic highway, first went to see road construction techniques then being used in Europe. Back in Oregon, they identified a route through the Columbia River Gorge with the stated intention to build a road “so as not to mar what God put there.” Workers constructed the Columbia River Highway between 1913 and 1922.

The law creating Oregon’s scenic highway system,
enacted in 1913, included provisions such as requirements that trees be preserved along the highway corridor, that additional landscaping and rest areas with informative signage be implemented, and that roadside advertising and other displays be regulated. Several decades later Oregon’s system became a model for a national scenic highway system administered by the U.S. Federal Highway Administration. Roads designated as “National Scenic Byways” in the system must demonstrate scenic, natural, historic, recreational, archaeological, or cultural significance.

A second category, “All-American Roads,” must represent multiple values from that list and have features that make them tourist destinations in themselves.

Just as the national park idea spread around the world, with each nation bringing its special qualities and character to protected areas, the scenic highway idea has been widely adopted:

**The Great Ocean Road** is a 243-kilometer stretch of scenic highway along Australia’s southeastern coast that was built between 1919 and 1932 by World War I veterans. The road passes many notable features including the 12 Apostles, a series of dramatic limestone sea stacks, as well as Great Otway National Park. The Great Ocean Road was accorded national heritage status in 2010.

**The Hardanger Route**, part of Norway’s system of National Tourist Routes, showcases classic scenery and is a gateway to Hardangervidda National Park, Norway’s largest. The Norwegian Public Roads Administration is developing the system to highlight the country’s varied landscapes and enhance Norway as a tourism destination.

**The Icefields Parkway** linking Banff and Jasper National Parks in the Canadian Rockies parallels the Continental Divide and passes some of the most glorious sights in all of Canada, including Lake Louise, the Columbia Icefields, Sunwapta Falls, and the Peyto Glacier.

**The Marguerite Route**, administered by the Danish Outdoor Council, is a designated tourist route with coordinated signage and marketing. Named for the favorite flower of the Danish queen, the Marguerite Route offers motorists a meandering tour through Denmark’s picturesque scenery.

**The Southern Scenic Route** takes travelers from Queenstown to Dunedin, New Zealand, enticing them with numerous opportunities for hiking, wildlife viewing, and other adventures in the rural countryside. The route...
highlights various cultural and natural attractions including Fiordland National Park, the largest in New Zealand.

**Germany’s famous Burgenstraße**, or “Castle Road,” is one of several dozen established scenic routes marketed by the German National Tourist Board. The Castle Road was established in 1954 and passes dozens of castles in Bavaria and Baden-Württemberg.

**The Garden Route in South Africa** meanders along the coastline of the Indian Ocean in one of the most biologically diverse regions of the globe. The region has the second mildest climate in the world after Hawaii and is named for the verdant and diverse vegetation found in ten protected reserves along the route.

These and many other examples of designated scenic roads highlight the diverse beauty of landscapes around the world but share some common characteristics. They generally link well-known historic, cultural, and natural features—and in some cases are a tourist attraction themselves. Some are administered by public agencies, others by a coalition of public and private entities including regional marketing associations. Some are recently designated, and others stretch back decades or even a century and came into being when the young field of landscape architecture turned its attention to transportation infrastructure as recreational motoring blossomed.

In virtually every case these scenic highways are part of regional or national economic development policy. Scenic roads have become economic engines for the communities along the route, boosting tourism and helping establish a quality of life that is central to attracting “footloose” businesses and people who want to live in a beautiful place.

**Adventure Tourism: A Growing Economic Force**

The travel industry is one of the world’s largest economic sectors (some economists say it is the largest single industry globally), and nations are working vigorously to boost their in-country recreational travel business and to compete in the lucrative international tourism marketplace. A large and growing subcategory of that marketplace is ecotourism. Chile is already an established destination for travelers who wish to hike, surf, ski, camp, fish, enjoy excellent locally produced wine, or simply experience stunning natural beauty.

Chile’s travel industry is growing rapidly. Prior to the 2010 earthquake the tourism sector was growing by roughly 8 percent annually; data for the first half of 2011 recorded 13 percent growth. Recent statistics show that tourism accounted for approximately 3 percent of Chilean
employment, more than 3 percent of gross domestic product, and more than two billion dollars in revenue. Some 2.75 million foreign travelers visit Chile each year and a large number of them spend time in national parks and reserves while in the country. Bolstered by the National Tourism Board’s campaign highlighting the country’s natural wonders using the motto, “Chile, Nature That Moves You,” visitation to national parks has more than doubled during the past decade, to roughly two million per year. But there is much more potential to promote tourism, especially in Patagonia, which has the ultimate brand. Indeed, the name Patagonia is synonymous with the allure of wild adventure at the end of the Earth.

**The Carretera Austral as National Scenic Highway**

The idea to designate the Carretera Austral as a national scenic highway is a compelling one, which offers Chile not only an opportunity to increase its tourism in the south but also the chance to create the model scenic highway program for the twenty-first century for other nations to emulate. Just as Chile is a global leader in creating large national parks and reserves, it could pioneer an approach to establishing scenic highways that would fully integrate environmental, economic, and social objectives. The goal would be a program that viewed the Carretera Austral as not just a transport route or tourist destination but also as a central part of the country’s development policy for Chilean Patagonia, capitalizing on the region’s extraordinary natural areas and rich cultural heritage.

Developing consistent, attractive signage along the road and coordinated marketing campaigns for the region are straightforward tasks. Various planning tools and community standards can protect scenic views and keep development from sprawling heedlessly along the highway. Integrating policy between the various ministries that oversee public works, national parks, and tourism is a greater challenge but readily achievable. Perhaps most difficult but, again, very possible for a forward-thinking government, is to make the Carretera Austral as ecologically benign and aesthetically attractive as possible with thoughtful roadbuilding standards, roadside landscaping guidelines, and dedication to mitigating the environmentally harmful aspects that are intrinsic to all roads.

Modern transportation networks have brought many advantages to people, but with unintended negative consequences, too. For an isolated community, a new or improved road portends social and economic benefits. For an already overdeveloped and overpopulated region, new roads may bring additional sprawl, pollution, and congestion. And for the Earth’s few remaining wilderness areas, new roads bring a loss of beauty and wildness, and creeping degradation of ecological integrity. By their very nature, road networks fragment wildlife habitat and, depending upon their construction and landscape context, can be significant barriers to animal movement that will isolate wildlife populations over time.

To address these negative effects, transportation planners in various countries are giving increased attention
to designing and building infrastructure that mitigates negative effects. In particular, considerable effort is going
toward making road networks more permeable to wildlife
movement through the use of underpasses, overpasses, and
other techniques that reduce roadkill and prevent collisions
between cars and wildlife. For those who have driven today’s
Carretera Austral, a lightly traveled and rough-hewn road,
these considerations may seem irrelevant. But even dirt
and gravel roads can deter some animals from crossing
and cause roadkill and habitat fragmentation. Moreover,
policy makers must consider the character and traffic on
the road not just today, but in the decades to come.

Thoughtful construction and maintenance can also
mitigate erosion and the resulting siltation that can harm
waterways and fish populations. These kinds of leading-edge
road-building standards, when combined with integrated
efforts to foster economic and social goals, could make the
Carretera Austral the premier scenic highway on Earth
and a model for ecologically sensitive transportation
infrastructure.

Arguably, the Carretera Austral is already South
America’s most spectacular road. The land unfurls before
the traveler, each vista more stunning than the last. The
experience can be transformative. After a 2011 trip, one
visitor from North America wrote:

I have to tell you honestly that Patagonia changed me.
I don’t believe I’ll ever be the same after that trip. I felt so
small amidst that grand wild place—it was as if the universe
resonated in me for a brief moment.

The qualities she experienced, beauty and wildness,
are abundant in Patagonia but not limitless. They are at
risk. The region is changing fast and already in some places
along the Carretera Austral, particularly near Puerto Mont,
sprawling roadside development is discounting Chile’s
greatest national asset—unparalleled beauty. By designating
the road a national scenic highway and implementing
appropriate policies now, future problems can be prevented,
but the need to act is urgent.

Having a national scenic highway that sets the standard
for the world to emulate is well within Chile’s grasp if
government and business leaders seize the opportunity. In
the twenty-first century, it is likely that beauty will be the
engine that drives the regional economy, replacing older
models based on resource exploitation. Indeed, preserving
an enduring resource of beauty will be the key to prosperity
for people and communities along the Carretera Austral,
one of the most spectacular stretches of road on Earth.
Leaving one Chile for another, an altogether different Chile. Goodbye to the manicured dairy farms of the 10th Region; hello to—what? A rougher landscape, less tamed, still inhabited but much less inhabited. Less open, less gentle, less welcoming. But still rewarding.

The first sign that this is wild country comes when the road, the Carretera Austral, barely begun, simply stops, at the ferry-loading ramp at Caleta Arena. This is Reloncaví Bay, first of many fjords cutting into this rugged coast. Not a long crossing, but already the shape of a new landscape is beginning to emerge, and it isn’t flat. Steep forested slopes rise abruptly from water’s edge toward twisting ridges and long rows of peaks, first green then snow-covered, white summits playing hide-and-seek among white clouds. The Carretera, narrow, already lonesome, winds through intact forests above the coast. Farms become fewer and much smaller. Finally, around a last green headland, here is Hornopirén, a town that feels almost temporary, cast up on the shores of an even larger fjord. A fjord that seems to dare you to go farther. Suddenly travel south seems much more challenging. The province of Palena is waiting for you. But you’ll have to earn it.
Following the coast of Reloncavi sound.
The coastal landscape along Reloncavi sound.

Scotch Broom surrounds a stream in springtime, near Puerto Montt.

< The coastal landscape along Reloncavi sound.
Crossing Reloncavi estuary, the first of multiple ferry connections along the Carretera.
Hornopirén, for the moment, connected by ferry to the rest of the Carretera Austral.
**The Missing Link**
**Waiting for a Connection**

Ingrid Espinoza

A Complex Natural Picture

In southern Chile, the rugged landscape of steep mountains, dense forests, and deep fjords between the towns of Hornopirén and Chaitén has effectively prevented the construction of roads connecting this area with the rest of Chile’s 10th Region, the popular and scenic “Lakes Region.” Approximately one-third of the Lakes Region is contained within the province of Palena, whose 18,000 inhabitants are spread out across four comunas, or counties: Hualaihué, Chaitén, Futaleufú, and Palena.

Palena Province sits squarely atop the Andean Cordillera and is comprised of steeply mountainous valleys, coastal islands, and fjords. Between Puerto Montt and Chaitén the Andes range rises to between 600 and 1,300 meters and falls abruptly into the sea. The entire zone is a complex puzzle of peaks and cliffs, islands, and fjords. It is a starkly beautiful and wild landscape.

The Carretera Austral

The Carretera Austral, Chile’s “Southern Highway,” begins at Puerto Montt and runs south for almost 1,200 kilometers to Villa O’Higgins. Only in Palena Province between Hornopirén and Chaitén is a section of this critical road missing. For multiple reasons, the inhabitants of this coastal region have been poorly served by the regional road-building plan. A mere ten kilometers of this “missing link” have been constructed on the Huequi Peninsula, and about 100 kilometers remain to be built.

The currently available land-sea connections, sketchy at best, have yet to reach and help the small coastal communities in this area. Nonetheless, the government is committed to providing the transportation connectivity that this area needs.
Realizing this connectivity, however, has proven to be quite difficult as it involves complex political, social, economic, and environmental issues.

There are a number of possible alternatives, and a variety of opinions on the best way to fill in this missing link in the Carretera Austral. But basically there are two choices: a coastal route or an “interior” (that is, an inland) route.

The inland option would establish an all-land connection and requires constructing a completely new road through very difficult terrain. Perhaps in the future there will be enough traffic and demand to justify this route. Such a project would involve very high construction and maintenance costs and would have a large ecological impact. It might also produce a less secure route due to the extremely steep terrain, which is prone to landslides that could possibly block the road for weeks on end.

By contrast, a route along the coast, although it would involve several ferry crossings, would cost from 50 to 100 times less than the inland option. Not only would the coastal route be more cost-effective, it would also guarantee a smaller environmental impact and ensure more comfortable, shorter, and more energy-efficient travel. It would also provide additional social benefits by serving coastal populations that are now isolated. Whatever the route, the real challenge in this zone remains establishing a north–south connection that will integrate local communities with the rest of southern Chile.

Today, energy-efficient transportation is critical. Those who are in favor of the coastal route have begun to use this argument. The inland route involves greater distances (approximately 200 kilometers more in a trip from Puerto Montt to Chaitén and back) with all that implies in lost time, wear and tear on vehicles, and extra fuel consumed. In these times when efficiency and austerity are worldwide imperatives, such arguments have become ever more important to consider when evaluating road projects.

Building an inland route would require a hugely expensive construction project. Some have even proposed tunnels underneath the many fjords. But others suggest that it should be possible to save as much as a billion US dollars by completing the coastal road that is already partly built. This would require using modern ferries in several places, perhaps for 20 or 30 more years, until construction techniques for underwater tunnels that today are too complex and expensive become practical and affordable.

It is critical that those who plan and build roads take into account the additional costs that users will bear if the road is longer than it needs to be. The savings from reduced travel times can help offset future costs when better road-building technology becomes available. But beyond the economic and technical aspects of the process, planning and designing roads involves considering many other factors. Good roads need to be not only functional and safe but pleasant to travel on, respecting not degrading the environments they cross. This is especially important in the province of Palena where unspoiled and pristine landscapes constitute the very basis of future tourism, the centerpiece of regional economic development.
South of Hornopirén the landscape is defined by fjords.
Chumildén, where a possible future route follows the coast south toward Chaitén.
Snowy peaks reflected in Fiordo Largo, or Long Fjord.
Thousand-year-old Alerce trees in Pumalín Park.

Hidden Falls, la Cascada Escondida, Pumalín Park.

< Thousand-year-old Alerce trees in Pumalín Park.
Tourist cabins at Caleta Gonzalo, Pumalin Park.
The visitor center at Caleta Gonzalo, Pumalin Park. From here, the Carretera continues south on land.
After Chaitén the Carretera turns its back on the coast and plunges through the wilderness of southern Palena and northern Aisén—peaks, lakes, and rivers replace fjords and coves. The color palette here is predominantly green, a thousand greens: green lakes, green hillsides, green mountain ranges. Lago Yelcho, loved by fly fishermen, is so large you can’t see it all at once (but there are larger lakes still to come). High above Lago Yelcho you spot the white glacial teeth of Ventisquero Yelcho, and broad cirques of vertical granite cliffs. Waterfalls punctuate the drive. Rivers appear, follow the road, then flow away, out of sight. Suspension bridges are de rigueur.

At La Junta, the geographical crossroads of two valleys and two rivers, travelers are tempted by side trips, east to Lago Verde and west to Raúl Marín Balmaceda. But the Carretera beckons south. It hugs Lago Risopatrón, long and narrow and one more different shade of green, bordered by exotic plants, giant rhubarb, nalca, with two-meter leaves that a person could hide beneath. Stately coigue beech trees start to fill the forests on either side.

It’s a green-on-green journey until at last a long finger of the sea intrudes to announce Puyuhuapi, a sheltered waterfront town with its multicolored artisanal fishing boats, its German family names, and its deep German roots.
A suspension bridge across the outlet of Lago Yelcho.
The town of Chaitén after the eruption of its volcano, seen still smoking in the background.

El Amarillo, the southern entrance to Pumalín Park, beneath the cliffs of Mount Tabique.
South of Lago Yelcho the Carretera follows the sinuous course of the Río Frío, or Cold River, toward La Junta.
La Junta, where roads and rivers cross.
So much green, so many waterfalls.

Puyuhuapi—rain, drizzle, mist and fog—
Welcome to wet Patagonia! >
Puyuhuapi Fjord and the small town of the same name.
Leaving the sheltered waters of Fiordo Puyuhuapi, and its small fishing port of the same name, the Carretera passes below the Ventisquero Colgante, or Hanging Glacier, an iconic landmark of Queulat National Park. This high glacier sends a constant cascade of ice and water down immense cliffs into the lake below.

Then, after threading its way up Fiordo Queulat, the Carretera crosses the Queulat Pass in a fiercely steep zig-zagging ascent and descent—an interesting example of imaginative road building without leaving ugly scars on the steep terrain. Sharp peaks, glaciers, and vertical cliffs dominate the plunging views from both sides of this pass. Near the summit, the Enchanted Forest Trail, el Sendero de Bosque Encantado, invites travelers to park and enjoy a short but surreal hike. Beneath the pass, rugged peaks form the backdrop of a very scenic drive along the Río Cisnes, past Villa Amengual, and around the shore of Lago Las Torres. Eventually this sharp topography relents and opens out into the wide and graceful Campo Grande and the Manihuales valley—in springtime a paradise of wildflowers. When the Manihuales valley ends, the Carretera follows the canyon of the Río Simpson whose cliffs and waterfalls lead us all the way to Coihaique, the capital of Aisén and the largest city on the Carretera Austral.
Queulat Pass, 500 meters above sea level, Queulat National Park.
Summits and glaciers in Queulat National Park, directly above the Carretera Austral.
A mountain stream at the foot of Queulat Pass.

The road between Queulat Nat’l Park and Villa Amengual.

< A mountain stream at the foot of Queulat Pass.
Lago Las Torres, a national nature reserve.
The recently paved Carretera, along the shore of Lago Las Torres.
Snowy peaks reflected in Lago Las Torres.

Mañihuales valley in spring, an explosion of colors.
Coihaique, capital of the Aisén Región.
After the mirror of Lago Foitsek and the white spray of El Salto Falls, just outside Coyhaique, the Carretera snakes over rolling hills, past green pastures and large farms—easy traveling—trending east toward the border with Argentina. Then, just past the little town of El Blanco, a fork in the road steers us south, up into the mountains. We head toward the highest pass on the Carretera Austral, the Portezuelo Ibáñez, (1,425 meters above sea level). Polychrome rocks overhang the road. A rare species of deer native to Chile, the huemul sometimes makes an appearance since the Carretera here travels through the Reserva Nacional de Cerro Castillo, home to a small population of these threatened but emblematic deer. The pass itself is right at timberline, and long open meadows fill the high valleys beneath limestone towers and the last few lenga and ñirre trees. Cerro Castillo—this aptly named “Castle Mountain”—hides its cliffs, turrets, and spires until you have crossed the pass and wound your way down the switchbacks of the Devil’s Grade, la Cuesta del Diablo. Cerro Castillo is not actually the highest peak but it’s surely the most spectacular mountain you’ll see right beside the Carretera—so close you feel you could reach up and touch it. The tiny town of Villa Cerro Castillo nestles right at the foot of this giant.
Lago Foitzick just outside of Coihaique.
Ibáñez Pass in its autumn finery.

A waterfall only a few meters from the Carretera.
High on Ibañez Pass the lenga trees show off the most vivid red shades of autumn.
A geological fantasy on Ibáñez Pass.

Cerro Pernón, Cerro Castillo’s neighboring peak.
Springtime lupines beneath Cerro Castillo, the crown jewel of the Carretera.
Cerro Castillo, the mountain and the town look at each other across the Río Ibáñez.
For long years, Cerro Castillo marked the end of the pavement, where driving becomes “serious” or at least “interesting.” Leaving Cerro Castillo, we wind over a rocky bluff, high above the Ibáñez River valley, past the pale green water of Laguna Verde. We cross the Río Manso, Chile’s shortest river, then follow the Río Ibáñez past the Dead Forest, el Bosque Muerto, where ash from the Hudson volcano’s 1991 eruption has created a forest of ghostly trunks. Eventually the Carretera climbs up and left, south, out of the Ibáñez River valley to cross a pass leading to Lago General Carrera. This pass, Portezuelo Cofré-Cajon, is wide and high but still well below timberline—a riot of color in autumn when the lenga and fírrre beech trees turn red and gold. At the top of the pass Laguna Cofré drains in two directions. And we follow the southern slope down into the Murta River valley: a braided twisting river course that leads us between steep mountain walls to the first blue waters of Lago General Carrera. Did I say blue? A breathtaking, heartbreaking turquoise is more often what one sees, as the Carretera follows the winding cliff-lined shore of what appears to be an enormous lake. It is. But here the road is merely following a small northern arm of this vast lake. The main body of Lago Carrera, stretching more than 100 miles east to west, is still hidden behind the rocky peninsula where we find the small town of Puerto Río Tranquilo.
The confluence of the Río Manso with the Río Ibáñez.
The Dead Forest, el Bosque Muerto, the result of the eruption of Hudson volcano in 1991.
Rio Cajón-Cofré at the foot of the Cofré Pass.
Along the shore of Laguna Cofré, between the Río Ibáñez valley and the valley of the río Murta.

Noble coigue trees on the descent from Cofré Pass.
A small laguna beside the Río Murta becomes a mirror.
Lago General Carrera: the town of Bahía Murta to the left, on the right the Carretera continues to Puerto Tranquilo.
Puerto Tranquilo to Cochrane

This section is all about water—turquoise water! Here the road embraces Lago General Carrera, the second-largest lake in South America, so large it seems an inland sea. After leaving Puerto Río Tranquilo, the Carretera wraps all the way around the west end of the lake, beneath the glaciers of Monte San Valentín, highest peak in Patagonia, before curving back east. We cross the outlet of the lake where its turquoise waters empty into smaller Lago Bertrand. Then the Carretera makes a wide detour past tiny Lago Negro, before returning to Lago Bertrand where that lake narrows to become the Río Baker, the most emblematic and surely the most beautiful river in southern Chile. The waters of the Baker are the deepest possible turquoise, a breathtaking color that defies description and almost defies photography, especially in its first twenty kilometers beside the Carretera. After a dramatic confluence with the Río Nef, the Baker drops into a deep gorge, and the road winds high above it, a balcony with plunging views. The Carretera continues like a ribbon, strung high above the canyon bottom until it reaches the second largest town on the Carretera Austral, Cochrane.
Monte San Valentín on the right, the highest peak in Patagonia; to the left, el Escudo de Plata.
Lago General Carrera, looking to the east.
Los Colmillos, or the Fangs, pointed peaks above the delta of Río Leones.

The birth of the Río Baker.

< Los Colmillos, or the Fangs, pointed peaks above the delta of Río Leones.
The outlet of Lago General Carrera, where its waters begin their journey to the Pacific.
Lago Bertrand, the peaks of the Conteras range, and the deep red lenga forests of autumn.
Autumn colors in the ñirre beech forests beside the Río Baker.
The falls at the confluence of the Río Baker and Río Nef.
The Rio Baker in the “Balseo” sector, near Cochrane.
Cochrane to Caleta Tortel

South from Cochrane, the Carretera crosses a wide bench dotted with lakes. Lago Esmeralda, Lago Juncal, Lago Chacabuco, Laguna Larga. Then in a wide sweep the Carretera dives down, way down, following the Barrancoso canyon toward the lower Río Baker valley with its big views of big peaks. Here multiple small rivers and streams join the Baker on its trip to the sea. Lago Vargas fills the foreground and the jagged summits immediately above invite us to stop the car and crane our necks upward. Eventually the Baker makes its reappearance beside the road, an old friend by now, but swollen into an amazingly wide, powerful, and sometimes muddy river, its brilliant upstream turquoise only a memory. Although, properly speaking, the Carretera Austral forks left and climbs steeply out of the Río Baker drainage, it is impossible to resist the extra thirty kilometers to arrive at and spend the evening in Caleta Tortel, where the Baker empties into the sea. In a zone with few dwellings and far fewer towns, Tortel is unique. A small logging town clinging to steep slopes above the water where a network of cypress walkways and stairs takes the place of streets. A gem.
Leaving Cochrane through the so-called Three Lakes sector; here we see Lago Junical.
Patagonian clouds near Cochrane.
The Río Salto south of Cochrane.

The Río Salto, near the Twin Falls, Los Mellizos.
Along the drainage of the río Baker, although invisible from the Carretera, the river's presence is always felt.
Snowy summits above Lago Vargas.
A garden of dead cypress trees, near Caleta Tortel.
Caleta Tortel, where wooden walkways and stairs replace streets and sidewalks.
Caleta Tortel to Villa O’Higgins

The last stretch of the Carretera Austral is appropriately the wildest. Here the Carretera, and indeed life in these parts, seems newly minted. Maybe this road wasn’t here yesterday, or last year. Who knows? Climbing up out of the Baker River drainage through steep mountainous terrain, the Carretera then drops back down to Puerto Yungay, a minimalist settlement on the banks of a fjord fed by the Río Bravo on its way to the sea. The tenuous nature of road building in the south is underscored by a long ferry crossing. The thrice-daily ferry takes you on an hour-long voyage to the continuation of the Carretera at Río Bravo. From here it’s an up-and-down journey. Up tight switchbacks, over windswept passes, dropping down into new valleys full of small lakes and mallines, or large Patagonian ponds. Finally we drive along the shores of some really handsome lakes, Lago Tigre and Lago Cisnes, before the Río Mayer forces a loop-de-loop detour that brings us around—some 1,200 kilometers after we started at Puerto Montt—to Villa O’Higgins. Only a few kilometers farther, Lago O’Higgins stretches off toward the Southern Ice Field. This is the end of the road. The end of a grand adventure. The Carretera Austral.
Puerto Yungay and the ferry which takes one to Río Bravo and the continuation of the Carretera to Villa O’Higgins.
Rio Bravo, where the Carretera begins again, after the ferry crossing from Puerto Yungay.
Lago Tigre, one of many linked lakes.
A boggy wetland turns yellow under the summits of el cordón Nevado, or Snowy Range, near Villa O’Higgins.
Lago Cisnes, the Lake of Swans, with cerro Pilares behind.
Just past Villa O’Higgins, the last bridge, la puente Grosse; almost the end of the road.
The end of the Carretera: to the right, Lago Cisnes; to the left, Lago O'Higgins.
All adventures come to an end—even a spectacular trip down the 1,200-kilometer length of the Carretera Austral. Or a trip through the pages of this book, celebrating the beauty of the rich, varied Patagonian countryside that this extraordinary road opens to the traveler. Such beauty is a gift, a gift to Chile, to the Chilean people, and to the world. But it carries a certain responsibility.

Will tomorrow’s travelers, and future generations of visitors to the region, enjoy the same beauty? Can we protect the scenic wonders of this road? Can we enhance the experience of other travelers, other pilgrims who come in their turn to enjoy this spectacular and unique scenery? Will we take the practical steps needed to enhance the Carretera Austral with better road-building standards, handsome roadside amenities, scenic rest stops, improved landscaping, and more attention to maintenance and even small details like garbage pickup along the road?

This future is in our hands. But the future of this road will depend not only on the quality of its construction and maintenance by the highway authorities, la Vialidad, but also on the collective effort of communities along the Carretera, including all those who have homes, farms, and property along or within sight of the road. They too need to contribute to the care and upkeep of this regional treasure in a true, joint public-private effort.

Chileans can be justly proud of the scenic wonders of their Patagonian landscape. And communities along the Carretera can express this pride through a greater concern for one of their major assets—the scenic beauty of their region, and their road. Their road, and their children’s road, La Carretera Austral of today, and tomorrow. With luck, and above all vision, the adventure of the Carretera Austral, the most spectacular scenic road in South America, never needs to end.

Reflections of unnamed peaks beside the Carretera.
Linde Waidhofer, a North American landscape photographer, has photographed nature in all its forms, in every season, in many countries, on two hemispheres. Since 2002 she has concentrated on exploring Patagonia with her camera. The author of seven photo books, Linde considers Chilean Patagonia to be her “other home,” and the Carretera Austral the most photogenic road she knows. Her Patagonian images can be seen at www.westerneye.com.

Rolando Toloza, civil engineer in the Road Department of the Ministry of Public Works (la Dirección de Vialidad del Ministerio de Obras Públicas) is in charge of Ruta 7, the Carretera Austral. He graciously wrote the opening essay of this book. In his official capacity, señor Toloza has been a tireless advocate for realizing the full potential of one of the most amazing scenic routes in Chile, and the world.

Douglas Tompkins, a conservation activist and philanthropist, created Pumalín Park and opened it to the public. He also helped create Corcovado National Park by orchestrating the acquisition and donation of private land to the Chilean national park system. His experiences in Pumalín Park convinced him of the value of an officially designated National Scenic Highway.

Tom Butler, a longtime conservation activist and writer, has written and edited numerous books on the natural world and the people working to preserve it. His research on Scenic Highways around the world convinced him that the Carretera Austral is the perfect candidate to become Chile’s premier National Scenic Highway.

Ingrid Espinoza, a forestry engineer trained at the University of Chile, wrote the essay on the Missing Link, the all-important connection between Hornopirén and Chaitén, needed to complete this marvelous scenic route. She has worked on dozens of conservation projects in Southern Chile.

Lito Tejada-Flores began to travel on the Carretera Austral ten years ago and hasn’t stopped since. Every year, every trip, this road reveals new secrets, new beauty. He wrote the introductory texts to each section of the route. As writer and designer, he has collaborated with his wife, photographer Linde Waidhofer, on all of her books.

Santiago Doeyo and María Soledad Rodríguez, a husband-and-wife team of gifted infographic artists, created the beautiful maps of the Carretera Austral.
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Thanks as well to:

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This English eBook version The Carretera Austral, is based on a faithful translation of the first Spanish edition which received official authorization for its maps from DIFROL.*
This eBook is an experimental draft, not meant for distribution.
The texts are composed in Garamond Premier Pro and the titles in Copperplate Gothic Bold.

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A landscape is not the more or less accurate description of what our eyes see, but rather the revelation of what lies behind visual appearances.

A landscape never refers only to itself but to something else, something beyond.
It is a metaphysics, a religion, an idea of man and the cosmos.

Octavio Paz