

This week's dream: Discovering South America's own Middle Earth

On Chile's Chiloé Island, "every day brings a new surprise," said Anne Z. Cooke in the *Chicago Tribune*. By an accident of history, this verdant land was shut off from the world for centuries, and it's "a true one-off," unlike any other place I've ever visited. Chiloé and the 39 smaller islands in the Chiloé Archipelago look nothing like most of the rest of the long, arid, rocky tail of South America, but my husband and I didn't trust what we'd heard about it until our cab pulled up at our hotel. Beyond the windows of the Parque Quilquico lay a wonderland of rolling hills, grassy meadows, leafy trees, and half-hidden vales sloping down to the sea. If someone had told me we'd landed in Middle Earth, I'd have believed it. "Only the hobbits were missing."

So how did this stretch of rich farmland surrounded by a sea full of fish go unnoticed for so long? We soon learned that



The rolling hills of Chiloé's Tenuan Peninsula

Chiloé had served as a refuge for Spanish settlers in the late 16th century, when the conquistadores were defeated as they attempted to colonize the continent's entire Pacific coast. The settlers intermarried with the native Huilliche and began building a singular culture. Jesuit priests arrived early in the next century and encouraged converts to build wooden churches—about 17 of which rate today as the archipelago's

most visited sites. They're constructed like upside-down boats, because boat building was the type of construction the locals knew best.

Castro, the island's main city, features another signature building style: ancient wooden homes raised on stilts over the bay. The tides vary by as much as 23 feet in this section of the Chilean coast, creating thousands of shallow wetlands that attract a huge variety of birds.

But the most unusual stretch of land in Chiloé dates from another eon entirely. During the last ice age, all but one strip of the island was raked by a glacier, and that patch of indigenous rain forest now sits in a national park. The undergrowth there "is so tangled and thick that bushwhacking is impossible," but anyone can stroll a long loop of raised boardwalks, for a peek at "the way it used to be."

At the *Hotel Parque Quilquico* (hpq.cl), doubles start at \$202.

Hotel of the week



Steady New England comfort

White Hart Inn

Salisbury, Conn.

Describing this 18-room hotel as a work in progress "would be unfair," said *The New York Times*. Located in "one of the most picturesque towns in the Berkshires," it had been around for 200 years before a group that included Redbook's editor and author Malcolm Gladwell acquired it last fall. But the new team aims to restore the inn's role as a cultural center, and that's taking time. Meanwhile, chef Annie Wright is testing her talents in an in-house restaurant that's already a draw, and the walls are adorned by so many works by area artists that the inn feels "like a warm, well-curated museum." WhiteHart.com, off-peak doubles from \$175

Getting the flavor of...

Mount McKinley's wacky base camp

Talkeetna, Alaska, takes a perverse pride in century-old rumors that President Warren Harding's visit to the town caused his death a few days later, said John Flinn in the *San Francisco Chronicle*. But what else would you expect from the quirky settlement (population 470) that served as the model for the fictional town in the hit 1990s TV show *Northern Exposure*? For the past 17 years, the town's major has been a cat named Snibbs. Many really do wander down Main Street, and residents use the local radio station to share poetry with housemates living off the grid. There's still an active airport in the center of town, but more planes—including the ones who offer sightseeing flights around nearby Mount McKinley—now operate from a terminal on Talkeetna's outskirts. If you're not ready to climb the 20,327-foot peak, you should save up for one of the flights. "They're one of the grandest adventures you can have in Alaska."

A gator park in northern Florida

Florida's first state preserve puts on quite a show, said Melissa D.G. Kaplan in *The Washington Post*. Along a single trail in Payne's Prairie State Park, we counted 33 alligators and saw more of the park's 270 bird species than I could tally. We stopped at one point and listened to the cacophony of "squeaks, squeaks, coos, and chattering" as birds waded, dived, and "landed on the water like water skis." Lying just 10 miles outside Gainesville, the park encompasses an 8-mile-wide prairie that was a lake until the water suddenly drained into an underwater aquifer a century ago. Today, it's home to wild horses, cattle descended from those brought to Florida by Spanish settlers, and 30 herds. The landscape made me think of the Great Plains, except for the Spanish moss that hangs from the trees and those large oaks. "A few times, we wouldn't see an alligator nestled in the grasses until we were nearly on top of it."

Last-minute travel deals

A royal taste of Scotland

Take a five-day tour of Scotland and save \$1,200. The \$1,800 package includes castle tours, daily Scottish breakfast, a whisky tasting, and a royal dinner prepared by the former chef to Prince Charles and Princess Diana. Departs May 24. scotlandtouring.com

A Greenland cruise

Explore the peaks of western Greenland during a seven-night cruise aboard a 32-passenger schooner. A May 12 sailing with Adventure Life costs \$1,800 a person—a 40 percent savings. The offer includes shore excursions and greenhouse tickets. adventurelife.com

A global Buffet offer

Through May 15, almost 100 Buffet hotels around the world are offering 30 percent off stays of at least five nights. With the discount, doubles start at \$122 a night in some participating hotels. The package includes French-style afternoon tea. buffet.com