

TRAVEL TRENDS

Frogs meet ferns in Chile's Huilo Huilo wilderness park

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NELTUME, Chile – My first clue that Huilo Huilo, in central Chile, might not be your typical wilderness park was when I unfolded the tourist map and spotted the word "canopy."

An English word. Not one you'd expect to find in a Spanish dictionary. Nor a name you'd be likely to see on a map of a rare temperate rainforest, a 250,000-acre preserve in the foothills of the Andes Mountains.

I looked again and found a second "canopy," and a third, as if the map-maker tasked with illustrating Huilo Huilo's "green mansions" decided that if one canopy was good, three must be a charm. So I poured another cup of tea and took a closer look.

Huilo Huilo, a UNESCO-designated biosphere, is a park like Yellowstone or Glacier national parks, a protected biological reserve. But it's also a tourist resort, a for-profit business. Here, on the border between Patagonia and the Lakes District, where the Mapuche tribe once shared the trees with the forest fairies – living spirits of ferns and flowers, frogs and fungi

– eco-tourism is booming.

If any doubt remains, Huilo Huilo's tourist map, a "Where's Waldo" visitor guide, proves the

point. Done up in comic book colors and crowded with cartoon figures, it's chocka-block with visitor services, nature trails, ski slopes,

trout streams and hotels built to blend into the undergrowth.

Here is the Reino Fungi Lodge, the "Mushroom Queen," a fat round shape resting on a cement stalk. There is the multi-sided

Nothofagus Hotel & Spa, also known as the Baobob Hotel, with a tree growing in the dining room, guest room doors opening onto a spiraling corridor and an activities desk offering an infinite array of

outdoor adventures.

The Montana Magica hotel – the Magic Mountain – connected to the other hotels by a covered boardwalk, was the owner's first experiment in rustic design; the result is a moss-covered, cone-shaped, tree-like building with inset windows and a brook spilling off the top. Made almost entirely of custom-hewn local wood, its giant logs, thick beams and untrimmed board paneling are a one-off work of art.

On one corner of the map, a 125-foot waterfall rushes over a fractured rock; in another corner, a pair of horseback riders canter across a meadow. Forest trails, the Rio Fuy and Lake Pirehueico promote hiking, fishing, kayaking, easy and risky whitewater rafting, birding and horseback riding.

At the map's upper edge, an ice climber scales 7,946-foot Mocho Choshuenco's glacier while a skier schusses down this active volcano's snowy slopes. Miniature deer – the endangered Andean "huemul" – and a puma, Darwin frog and a clutch of long-necked guanaco – first cousins to the llama – peek out from between the trees.

On the volcano's lower forests, "Canopy" zip lines mark the spot where – as I was soon to discover



THE HOTEL NOTHOFAGUS – so-named for a genus of southern beech trees – is the largest of Huilo Huilo's four hotels, at the Huilo Huilo Biosphere Reserve, Chile.

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