



# Saddle

up

Riding with the gauchos: Patagonia's cowboy conservationists

## In the shadow of glacial peaks, where clear rivers cut through fog-draped forests and dense peatlands, Patagonia's gauchos are stepping into a new role: land stewards.

It's the beginning of the annual cattle drive in Chilean Patagonia, and 57 cows march through clouds of dust out of the village of Alto Palena. Dirt roads narrow into tight paths as the herd enters the Azul River Valley and its tangled temperate rainforest. Slate-gray ridges of the Andes rise around them, snow-capped even in December (the start of the austral summer), while lenga and coihue trees, dense along the lower slopes, groan in Patagonia's incessant winds. Kingfishers flutter along the riverbank, and the herd presses onward, traveling upvalley to summer pastures.

Leading the pack is Javier Lavoz, a third-generation gaucho, as these cowboys are called here, with the gait of man used to straddling steeds. Lavoz is the kind of country gentleman who lifts his hat when he greets you, part of a way of life that's steadily disappearing. Trotting next to him are Natalia Ibáñez and Cristian Galindo. The couple – dressed in goatskin chaps, beret-like boinas and handkerchiefs knotted at their throats – work with Lavoz to hold the line.

They might not look like typical conservationists, but they're fighting for this valley to become a protected area. In fact, they've just returned from the capital,

Santiago, 839 miles away, where, clothed in their traditional attire and armed with accordions and guitars to attract attention, they held a rally in front of the presidential palace to ask that their conservation area be legally recognized, empowering them to protect the lands they've always known. Crowds amassed beneath a giant Chilean flag, capturing the scene on cell phones and sharing it online.

"Someday, some foreigner could come here and take over the water rights and push us aside," says Lavoz, who stops along the riverbank with Ibáñez and Galindo to pass around a gourd of yerba mate tea. "That wouldn't be right because I've been working here for 25 years, raising animals without disturbing the environment."

For these gauchos, who will return in April to retrieve their cows, safeguarding the landscape also means preserving its culture, a culture intimately connected to the land. "We don't want our traditions to die because it's a big part of our identity," Lavoz explains. "As it is, there aren't many of us left who work in these mountains."

Intrepid ranchers – including Lavoz's grandparents – founded Alto Palena a century ago to fortify Chile's border with Argentina, 7.5 miles away. →





Chileans refer to these early settlers as los pioneros, or the pioneers. In many ways, their descendants still live a frontier existence, governed by the seasons and the needs of their cattle. It takes seven hours to get here from the closest commercial airport. It's also a two-hour detour from the Carretera Austral, or 'Southern Highway', the only artery linking the remote communities of Northern Chilean Patagonia. Nobody ends up in Alto Palena, with its population of just 1,908, by accident. And yet, more people have begun to arrive...

### **Protecting the land is personal**

The gravel roads snaking away from Alto Palena used to be dusty cow tracks. Over the past decade, they've pushed deeper into unprotected federal lands southwest of town, easing access for potential energy and logging projects, as well as moneyed northerners dreaming of Patagonian vacation properties. The latter has actually become one of the biggest threats all across Patagonia as the state sells off federal lands to private real estate investors, who can then restrict access and fragment the ecosystem.

"Land here is being parceled off for second homes and other purposes," explains Galindo, galloping past a half-built chalet along a road that didn't exist two years ago. "There are many areas here without formal land titles where anyone could come and build. Or worse, mining operations could destroy the ecosystem we've preserved over four generations."

These growing pressures are a big reason why the community pushed for a Multiple-Use Conservation Area (ACMU, in Spanish) southwest of town. Unlike a national park, this new protection model, launched in 2023, would enable residents to safeguard their natural environment while supporting sustainable economic development.

Galindo describes this work as deeply personal. "For those of us who are descendants of pioneers, it's about maintaining what they started," he says, steering cattle across the Azul River. He and his companions gallop up windy bluffs and descend into jade-green forests. A few miles later, they cross the frigid river again. Herding dogs nip at the heels of water-wary cows. All the while, the Andes poke higher in the sky, blue-hued glaciers dripping from rounded peaks.

The Universidad Austral de Chile assisted with the community's application for the new conservation status, providing biological mapping of the region. "What makes the Palena project so unique is that its creation

comes from the grassroots level, not from institutions,” says Jorge Silva, a forestry engineer who worked with Alto Palena on territorial planning.

Most conservation areas in Latin America have been imposed through top-down decisions, disenfranchising neighboring populations. In the case of Alto Palena, however, “the community itself is saying to the state, ‘we want to create a protected area because it has these strong ecological and cultural values,’” Silva notes. “That gives the prominence to local inhabitants, who are leveraging their deep knowledge to leave a legacy.”

### **The dream**

By the time the gauchos finish their cattle drive at Lavoz’s remote puesto (shepherd’s hut), it’s late, and the low light splinters through moss-covered coihue trees. Lavoz and Galindo tie the horses up for the evening, removing harnesses, sheepskin saddles, and chigua panniers braided in leather. Cows wander up the valley, munching on grasses, and the puesto soon glows under a small fire.

The shelter is simple, with no electricity or running water. There are dirt floors, tin roofs and four wooden sleeping platforms. Bowls and mugs hang from nails on the walls. Lavoz finds a steel pot and hooks it

over the fire, boiling a lamb and potato stew. After dinner, he plucks at his guitar, singing chamamé folk ballads as Ibáñez and Galindo pass around a bota de vino, the traditional goatskin wine flask. Then, they all sit together in hushed silence.

“Places like this have a rhythm of sound,” says Ibáñez, listening to the evening birdsong. “The river is like a whisper and the wind moving through the trees seems like someone sighing nearby.”

As head of tourism for Alto Palena, Ibáñez spearheaded the campaign for the new conservation area. She sees it as a tool to bring back the younger generation, which has avoided the harsh gaucho lifestyle for the comforts of Chilean cities. “Creating an area that conserves everything necessary for the environment, while also allowing multiple uses – including traditions and rural life – is really a dream,” she says. “Honestly, I still feel like I’m dreaming.”

Moro Alto Palena, the park’s official name, is on track to become the first conservation area in Chile that will allow for multiple uses. At least two other areas are in the process of trying to achieve the same thing, reflecting a greater movement across Latin America to foreground community-led conservation. →

**“Places like this have a rhythm of sound.  
The river is like a whisper and the wind moving  
through the trees seems like a sigh”**



Javier Lavoz takes a break during the annual cattle drive.





Moro Alto Palena will have zones for small-scale ranching, but also other sectors with stricter conservation objectives. In total, it will protect 109,198 acres, including 3,044 acres of glaciers, which feed 34 miles of pellucid rivers. Campaigners are working in tandem to get legal protection for the largest river here, the Palena, ensuring a natural flow from source to sea.

### Eco corridors and conversations

The protected area would share a border with the existing Lago Palena National Reserve, creating a roughly 247,105-acre wildlife corridor for pumas and condors, as well as endangered species like the Patagonian vizcacha and huemul deer (of which there are fewer than 2,000 left in the wild). Both are threatened by invasive animals like wild boars.

“The hardest conversations here are about predators, like pumas, which threaten livestock,” Ibáñez says. Big cats can attract tourists but have been traditionally hunted; they remain a fraught topic among many gauchos. “There are some battles I won’t be able to win, but perhaps the next generation will find it easier,” Ibáñez adds, pointing to Torres del Paine National Park, further south, where pumas were once hunted but are now the stars of a burgeoning safari industry.

Having a protected area would free up federal funds and help the community to build trails, campgrounds, and other park facilities, creating complementary revenue streams around ecotourism. Alto Palena doesn’t track tourist statistics, but visits to its summer-only information center increased from 500 in 2021 to more than 2,500 today. There is room for responsible growth.

Ibáñez envisions places like the El Arriero Glacier, a four-hour walk above the puesto, as a prime spot for adventure travelers. There are no existing trails, so to get there, she and Galindo use machetes the next morning to hack out a path. They first walk through a second-growth forest – a reminder of the slash-and-burn era in Alto Palena, when older generations cleared valleys to create farmland. Indiscriminate burning of the forest stopped about three decades ago. Modern gauchos, Ibáñez explains, are more environmentally conscious, utilizing less land and repurposing dead trunks for firewood and fencing.

Soon, Ibáñez and Galindo reach a hilltop overlook with views of the hanging glacier, which is cradled between two chunky massifs, its blue ice spilling into dense Patagonian forest. Hiking further to the moraine

lake, they pass centuries-old lenga trees with trunks the size of trucks, as well as birds like the hued-hued, named after the sound of their calls.

“Our ultimate dream is that Moro Alto Palena gets official recognition, the neighbors are fully involved, and children like mine can visit this place in the future in a meaningful and lasting way,” Ibáñez says, adding: “The most important thing is that tourism doesn’t change life here – it should improve it.”

Back down at the puesto that evening, Ibáñez and Galindo huddle by the fire with Lavoz, who swigs at the wine flask. He is happy to be here again. He doesn’t care for big cities and didn’t really want to go to the capital in the first place, Lavoz says. But he wasn’t just fighting for his own home. Lavoz knew that if he could make some noise, and if it carried far enough, other communities might glimpse something in Alto Palena: a model they, too, could follow.<sup>5</sup>



Natalia Ibáñez admires a local wildflower.



