



# FLY ME TO THE MOON

Strong winds, big mountains and live volcanoes. Jan Schäfer and Till Middelhaue go flying in Chile's Lake District



**A** small lane led us through a landscape of grey and black volcanic rock towards the setting sun. We drove carefully, focused on the rough terrain, but finally we reached the edge of the impressive Laguna de Laja at the foot of Chile's Volcano Antuco.

Google Earth had not disappointed. You don't find countless paramotor travelogues about Chile when you search the internet, so we had researched our trip using Google, looking for interesting landscapes, good launch sites and beautiful places to fly. And that had brought us here, to this stunning lake, high in the mountains at 1,500 m.

On the other side of it was the most northerly point of our tour, which had taken us through the centre of Chile, the so-called Lagos Andinos, or Chilean Lake District, with its endless volcanoes and lakes that extend into Argentina. We parked our pickup truck, which was heavily loaded with two paramotors, one bike and camping equipment, put up our tent for the night and settled down to cook. This spot exactly matched our grand and growing demands that we had developed over the course of the trip. We always looked for the perfect campsite: at the beginning a tiny dead-end road would be enough for us to pitch a tent, but later we got fussy as we discovered what was on offer. Our first criteria was that it had to be scenic. Secondly, there needed to be at least a river for swimming, if not an entire lake to cool the beer. We needed firewood to hand and a launch site nearby, preferably behind the tent. We were rarely disappointed. Only mobile phone reception, to give us a sense of security in hard to reach areas, was never a given.

We had found all this and more, for example, at a tiny delta that flowed into Lago Caburga, 500 m away from a main gravel road where we saw about two cars an hour. Woken in the morning by cows and horses that had

discovered our leftover food we spread our gliders, warmed the motors and flew along the lakeshore. Skimming across the sandy beaches and through the bright green grass of a meandering river we startled small flocks of birds, which rose before us into the sky. Horses looked up, ears pricked as we approached, while before us lay the blue lake, set deep in high forested mountains. We were so close to civilisation, yet in the middle of pure wilderness.

One evening however, our search for the perfect campsite failed us. A huge moonscape at the head of the River BioBio that we had seen on Google Earth had awoken our curiosity. In search of the perfect camping and launch site we had crossed a wooden plank bridge, easing over it in our two-tonne vehicle despite the sign warning one tonne maximum. But still nothing. A farm emerged, set in a wild grassy landscape, and so we asked if we could stay the night. As had happened so often before we were welcomed warmly. Could we drive on, we asked? "Si, si!"

And light a fire? "Si, si!"

And can we fly with paramotors? "Si, si!"

Are you sure, it's very loud? "Si, si!"

Later the son of the farmer suggested an excellent fishing spot, and offered his horse for a morning gallop. The half hour ride in the morning chillness was a memorable way to start the day.

We started our motors at 7.30 am directly beside our tent, and had an unforgettable flight over the BioBio. The evening before, a huge lenticular cloud had covered the sky, but in the morning it was windless and mist hung above the river. We flew low and traced a path through it, revealing a sparkling river underneath, glowing red in the rising sun. Afterwards we landed at our private campsite for breakfast and basked in our own glow, of our flight and the sunshine.

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## VOLCANO VILLARICA

The strong wind systems of the Andes, fed by the cool air masses of the Humboldt Current, usually allowed us only early morning and late evening flights. It was because of this that we found ourselves landing in darkness, city lights already glowing, when we flew near Volcano Villarica.

We had taken off from the airport in Pucon, where the serious looking airport director had given us immediate permission to use the runway, without any red tape at all. Taking position on a huge black tarmac strip I only had to move out of the way once as a Lear Jet took priority on take off.

Finally we got into the evening sky and flew for an hour. Our objective was to get as close as possible to the steaming top of Villarica, height 2,800 m. But the sunset forced us to abort, and suddenly everything was going badly. It was dark, and 200 m above the ground there was strong wind shear with turbulence. Worse, there was



a helicopter directly below and in front of us, preparing to land at the same time.

Under tension, which was noticeable in his voice, Till announced over the radio that we were paragliders preparing to land.

"No worries, we can see you," said the helicopter pilot, in a relaxed and comforting tone. He moved off to let us come in, and we landed safely, reliving it all in the bar later.

Our second attempt on Villarica two days later was cancelled due to low cloud. However, later in the day holes appeared in it and we were able to fly through them, above a sea of cloud with volcanoes all around. But despite some amazing views the strong wind meant it was not possible to get near the summit.

But the wind was in our favour once or twice, too. One morning our beach takeoff next to our tent was in the lee, forcing us to look for other options. We found a runway on the map, but it was locked,



and other options failed to appear. All seemed lost, as the fields were fenced in and no one was around to ask about access. Discouraged, we stood on the gravel road in front of yet another locked gate and then realised the wind was blowing right into our faces. This gravel road was the longest runway by far, and it was perfectly into wind.

With no time to lose I spread my glider out on the road, Till stopped an approaching car to give me space, and I lifted off into the air. From the air I told Till about the traffic on the road, and in a clear space he launched too. Finally, and against initial expectations, we were in the air and enjoying flying again.

Landing was another story – I had two goes, mainly because a bus slowed down to give its passengers a better view of the unidentified flying object.

Back at Laguna de Laja, despite the lateness of the day, flight conditions were still not good. We had spent the day hiking, but now the sun had set,

leaving a dark red sky above the mountain. The first stars twinkled brightly as we ate our noodles. Later, the stars became our ceiling and that was when the wind finally died.

We were preparing for bed when the full moon appeared, flooding the valley with light and creating sharp shadows of the volcano in front of us. It was almost as good as daylight. We looked at each other. The wind was light, there was enough light to see, our motors were ready... Shortly after we dived towards the sky, our engines rattling away into the night. We looked down on a beautiful landscape lit by the moon. The Laguna de Laja in front of us, pitch black, the rock of the mountains below us glowing in the moonlight, the stars above, the full moon behind us. This was beyond expectations, beyond dreams. This was Chile, and another reminder that the flying possibilities here are endless. 🇨🇱



## TRIP NOTES

All you need to know about flying in Chile's Lake District

### GETTING THERE

We flew from Frankfurt to Santiago, carrying two pieces of 23 kg luggage each. That was enough for the engine torso and the flying gear. The rest traveled in advance via air cargo.

### GETTING AROUND

In Chile renting a car is a good idea, because national flights won't carry that much luggage. By car it is an eight hour ride to the Lake District. We didn't need a 4WD but you definitely need a cross country car to be comfortable with all the gravel roads. We hired a 4 x 2 Nissan Terrano from Hertz – the only company that answered our emails. It cost €1,400 for three weeks. Petrol is €0.80 a litre.

### WEATHER

We used windfinder.com and a German service for Chile at [www.wetteronline.de](http://www.wetteronline.de).

### MAPS

We printed out Google Earth cards and got some detailed maps from [www.mapsoftheandes.de](http://www.mapsoftheandes.de). We found no GPS maps.

### WHEN TO GO

November to March when it is summer. The later the summer gets the less the thermic activity. February is quite calm.

### COSTS

€20 a head a day for the basics, if camping. Otherwise reasonable rooms in cabanas cost around €10 a night per person and it's €7 - €12 a head in restaurants.

### SITES

GPS coordinates of sites flown include

Laguna de Laja, Volcano Antuco:  
37°24'42.30"S, 71°17'14.27"W

Lago Caburgua:  
39° 3'45.33"S, 71°41'48.83"W

Lonquimay/Rio BioBio:  
38°27'14.37"S, 71°13'47.30"W

Airport Pucon airport:  
39°17'26.87"S, 71°55'19.34"W

Lago Panguipulli, gravel road take off:  
39°50'4.75"S, 72° 3'47.61"W