

Mars on Earth

THE ATACAMA DESERT IN CHILE IS A WORLD WITHIN ITS OWN

BY SHELLEY SEALE



Photo: EXPLORA

The narrowest country in the world is, despite the sliver of land it occupies, a country of wild contrast. While great glaciers scrape the base of snow-capped volcanoes in the southern Patagonia region, the northernmost point of Chile is home to the driest desert in the world. The Atacama Desert lies along the base of the Andes mountain range at the borders of Bolivia and Argentina, presenting a geography that is almost like another planet.

Its otherworldly appearance and terrain have been likened to Mars; so much so that it has been the location for many movies filming Mars scenes, and NASA tests instruments for future Mars missions here. The lack of rain – an average of only .04 inches per year in the entire region – has created riverbeds that scientists believe have been dry for 120,000 years. Some parts of the Atacama have not seen rain in recorded history. The immensity of the landscape is breathtaking, as you pass copper and lithium mines made famous by Che Guevara and the 2010 incident that trapped 33 miners for two months, with smoking 35 million-year-old volcanic mountains of up to 22,000 feet looming over it all.

The forbidding geography is home to an incredibly hardy people with a long lineage in human history. Some mummified remains in Father Le

Paige's Museum at San Pedro de Atacama are the oldest in the world, pre-dating Egyptian relics by thousands of years. The Atacameño people were relentlessly persecuted by the Spanish, their religion, culture and language under attack for centuries; yet somehow they have preserved a way of life that is fascinating, and very welcoming to visitors.

The picturesque town of San Pedro de Atacama is home to about 2,500 people, and is the archaeological capital of Chile. It is a quiet town that makes for a nice walking tour, with a number of artisan shops, a craft market, a historic church, the museum and several good restaurants. Try La Casona for traditional Chilean food, or Las Delicias de Carmen for fresh home cooking. If you want to stay "in town," the Tierra Atacama Hotel & Spa is your ticket, about a fifteen-minute walk from the centre of the village.

The architecture and décor of Tierra Atacama are the result of the work of some of Chile's leading creative talents. The lobby exudes a cool, yet warm and inviting, mid-century modern feel with a cosy fireplace and attached restaurant. Views out the floor-to-ceiling windows and from the gardens take in the Licancabur Volcano, and guest rooms are furnished with local textiles and furniture in a casually minimalist design.



Tierra Atacama



Tierra Atacama

The outdoor fire terrace is particularly inviting at sunset when you can watch the volcano turn amazing shades of pink and purple, over a house cocktail specialty.

Also just at the edge of San Pedro is the Explora Hotel de Larache, on 42 acres of grounds that include ancient pathways of the Atacameño. Fifty rooms are housed in buildings that form a central square together with the public areas, forming a labyrinth that invites exploration. The lodge was renovated in 2008, and is the only Atacama hotel with its own stable of horses, perfect for exploring the area.

A few kilometres away from town, the Alto Atacama Desert Lodge & Spa is tucked away in a valley of serene beauty, a luxurious yet eco-friendly respite that is designed into the landscape, not apart from it. The Alto Atacama is a place where you can relax and pamper yourself, or use a jumping-off point for some of the world's most amazing outdoor adventures and cultural experiences.

The entire property has been built in the style of a traditional adobe settlement, complete with llamas and native crops. All elements are carefully designed to blend into the desert and integrate with the indigenous building patterns, forming one of the most astonishing



Photo: EXPLORA

WANDERLUST

settings in the world. The entire design and building of the resort is proof that with effort, we, too, can become a part of the environment without changing – or spoiling – it.

To delve into the history and culture of the region, hike up the Pukara de Quitor, a fort just outside the entrance to Alto Atacama. The fort was built around 900 B.C., and used by the Atacameño until the Spanish took over it centuries later. The fort is dotted with signs explaining its history of invasion upon the peaceful people, in both English and Spanish, and a climb to the top yields magnificent views of the desert gorge below.

You can easily walk to Pukara from the Alto Atacama hotel, or hop on one of their loaner bikes to continue on an exploration of the surrounding valleys and villages. Touring San Pedro and its nearby areas makes a terrific first-day excursion, when you may still be acclimating to the effects of the high altitude.

When it comes to venturing farther afield, plenty of adventures await. Salar de Atacama, the largest salt flat in Chile and third-largest in the world, is as fantastical as the Atacama gets — jagged salt-crustured rocks rising from the ground amid shallow pools of the desert's precious water. The salt lakes also hold the most incongruous, but enchanting sight: dozens of vivid flamingos. Three species of flamingo live in the Salar, some of the only animal life outside llamas and lizards to exist in the ruthless climate.

But perhaps the most breathtaking sight in the Atacama is sunset at the Valley of the Moon. It is best to arrive a couple of hours before twilight, for plenty of hiking through the rock formations and colourful striated mountainsides. As you may have guessed from its name, this



PHOTO SHELLEY SEALE



Alto Atacama



Hotel De Larache

area is the most lunar-like geography in the Atacama, with the clearest skies in the southern hemisphere. When the sun begins to dip behind the Andes peaks, it throws an ever-changing colour palette across the landscape in one of nature's most dramatic shows.

Once the sun has completely made its exit, the night skies here are perfect for stargazing. There is a reason why the world's most advanced visible-light astronomical observatory, Paranal, is located here. It is the flagship facility for the European Southern Observatory; its telescope is so powerful that it can distinguish the two headlights of a car at the distance from the moon. Free guided, public tours of Paranal run every weekend.

For more personal astronomy endeavours, head back to the Alto Atacama or the Explora, both of which have their own observation decks with lounge chairs and research-grade telescopes. Knowledgeable guides are on hand to point out galaxies and the major stars and constellations of the southern sky, allowing you to truly experience the wonders of that glittery, far-flung world through the lens.

When it comes to immersing yourself in local culture, several options are available. Alto Atacama can connect visitors with the Lopez family, who runs Turismo Indigena, a local tourism initiative that brings visitors into the Lopez's ayllu (local village) and introduces them to the indigenous way of life. You can help lead



PHOTO CHILE TOURISM



Photo: CHILE TOURISM

llamas across the desert; see how chañar berries are made into all kinds of things including syrup, jam and natural medicinal remedies; and sample the local moonshine, a corn alcohol drink called chicha.

Of course, there's more to chicha than drinking. It's made with patasca, a type of corn, and is produced for celebration and imbibed mostly during special events, such as National Day. The Lopez family has been churning it out for generations and demonstrates the process of boiling the corn and softening it with ash, before grinding it down for the fermentation process. This is as real as it gets – an antidote to the tourist display put on in far too many previously undiscovered destinations.

Or get hands-on in a culinary workshop, learning Chilean altiplano gastronomy with Ruth Van Waerebeeck, a Belgian who has lived in Chile since 2000. Hotel Tierra Atacama arranges these gastronomy sessions several times a year, and is when guests have the opportunity to visit small producers in the area, enjoy traditional Atacameñan lunches, wine and food pairings, and take practical cooking classes with Van Waerebeeck. The resort also offers wine, photography and volcano climbing programmes.

Other Atacama adventures include mountain biking, bird watching and wildlife tours, climbing, cave exploration and horseriding. One popular expedition is the Valley of Tara, way up at 12,000 feet. After travelling through the desert with its stark and spectacular scenery, lunch can be enjoyed at a small lake in an incredibly green valley, surrounded by amazing rock pillars. Sometimes llamas will even stroll up to take a drink at the lake, seemingly unperturbed by the human visitors. All excursions can be arranged through the three hotels – and when you've had enough of these adrenalin-pumping activities, you can retreat to their tranquil spas for a well-deserved dose of pampering and relaxation.

Somehow in this alternately unforgiving and breathtaking landscape, the Atacameño have managed to preserve their way of life amid the attacks of both marauders and the unrelenting terrain – which in all its austerity is still one of the most breathtaking spots you will ever lay eyes on. ▲



Photo: SHELLEY SEALE



Photo: CHILE TOURISM



GETTING THERE

The Atacama Desert can be reached via a two-hour plane ride from Santiago to the Calama airport. San Pedro de Atacama and the resorts are about a 90-minute drive away.



USEFUL INFO:

- Guide to Chile www.chile.travel
- Paranal Observatory www.eso.org
- San Pedro de Atacama www.sanpedroatacama.com



CHECK-IN

- Tierra Atacama Hotel & Spa www.tierraatacama.com
- Explora Hotel de Larache www.explora.com
- Alto Atacama Desert Lodge & Spa www.altoatacama.com