

desert TREK

Looking for an out-of-this-world experience? *Emma Soley* explores **CHILE'S ATACAMA DESERT**

TIERRA ATACAMA



in one of the least hospitable climates on earth. A huge and cozy living room is the hub of the resort—a place for gathering and swapping stories and plotting excursions on a giant, hand-painted map, like ancient explorers. The design is a marriage of rustic and sophisticated with mid-century modern curvy sofas and sheepskin-lined banquettes. By day, the room is flooded with light from the floor-to-ceiling windows. By night, guests settle onto woven-leather stools at the long wooden bar to drink Chile's signature cocktail, the pisco sour—an addictive concoction of grape liquor (pisco), bitters, sugar, egg whites and fresh lime.



INTERSTELLAR TRAVEL might still be a ways off, but the landscape of Chile's Atacama Desert does a pretty good impression of another planet. Situated in the northern tip of the country, where Chile rubs shoulders with Bolivia, this otherworldly region is gaining a reputation as one of the world's most alluring places.

With a week up my sleeve and a yearning for adventure, I pack my hiking boots and set off for South America, not entirely sure how to prepare for one of the driest deserts in the world. (The answer, as it turns out: lots of moisturizer.)

Night has fallen and the inky sky is strewn with stars by the time I arrive at Tierra Atacama (tierraatacama.com). This boutique lodge, on the outskirts of the dusty town of San Pedro de Atacama, is an oasis of laid-back luxury and warmth

After a dinner of grilled mahimahi on quinoa, I sit with a guide who helps map out the game plan for my stay. This isn't the kind of place you come to kick back and work on your tan (although the pool, situated in the middle of rosemary and lavender gardens with views of the Andes, is undeniably tempting.) Every moment is plotted to get the most from the beguiling Altiplano, or high plateau.

The next morning I set out early for Valle de la Luna (The Moon Valley), an eerily beautiful depression of red-tinged sandstone, salt caves and giant sand dunes. As I squeeze through narrow corridors flanked by jagged formations, the salt crystals in the rock creak and groan—the only sound in an empty, silent world. Almost nothing lives here, only the occasional insect. In another part of the valley, a massive sand dune looms against the blue sky like the velvety >

VALLE DE LA LUNA

spine of a sleeping creature. Beyond is a field of smaller dunes, shaped over centuries by the wind. I wander through abandoned salt mines and past The Three Maries, million-year-old rock formations that reach from the earth like gnarled fingers.

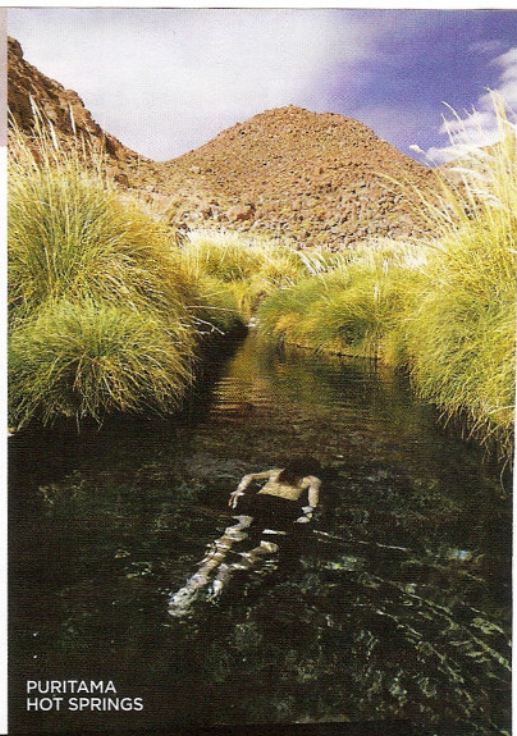
After lunch back at the lodge, I head out to the famous Salar de Atacama. These immense salt flats are home to three kinds of protected flamingos. Marooned in a huge, crater-like basin surrounded on all sides by craggy mountain ranges, it's impossible not to feel awestruck by the sheer dominance of the landscape. Narrow pathways wind through flats filled with flocks of flamingos, wading through briny upwellings of water to search for the tiny shrimp responsible for their flamboyant colours. They squawk and preen and occasionally take off over my head, their huge wings dark against the setting sun. As the sun begins its final descent, the Andes transform, lighting up in a Technicolor display of pink, purple, blue, rose and peach as the light passes across their surfaces. It's a mesmerizing sight.

I've already racked up several firsts, but the adventures have just begun. One morning I ride a mountain bike out to a series of clear blue lagoons located in plains of crunchy crystallized salt, with burnished, deep-gold marsh grasses in the background. People braver than I strip-down and jump into the pools; it's so salty they float like corks, a novelty that doesn't quite seem worth the pain suggested by their screams as they hit the icy water. Another afternoon is spent traversing a hidden canyon—which entails two hours of rock scrambling, and ambling along sandy paths and fording streams while gazing up at gigantic cacti silhouetted against a flawless blue sky. When I finally reach the top of the ridge, a group of startled llamas freeze and stare at me for minutes.

One bleary-eyed, icy pre-dawn, I bundle up like the Michelin Man for a trip to the El Tatio geysers, a volcanic field of smouldering, belching steam columns high in the mountains. As I stomp along past the geysers, forms disappear and loom out of the steam and mist-like spectres that are tinged silver by the first weak rays of dawn. After exploring, I huddle near our tour vehicle, sipping hot chocolate

and watching the blurry dark shapes around us transform into towering mountains as the sun finally appears.

My last day is spent following the meandering course of the geothermal Puritama River, through glowing, head-high golden plants called foxtails. The water steams invitingly as I pick my way through the silent, lonely canyon. I'm rewarded after the long hike with a stop at a series of cascading warm pools called the Puritama Hot Springs. Soaking in the crystal-clear water as the surface steams, surrounded by forbidding mountains and deserts where few life forms can survive, I feel like I've stumbled onto the set of a sci-fi film. The Atacama Desert really is another world. □



PURITAMA
HOT SPRINGS

SAN PEDRO
DE ATACAMA

What to see and do:

SAN PEDRO DE ATACAMA This small town consists simply of a main street lined with red and white adobe buildings, a tranquil leafy plaza with a whitewashed colonial church called Iglesia de San Pedro and several side streets, but it's nevertheless a huge magnet for travellers. The dusty red-streets are packed with young, bohemian types from all over the world, drinking, eating, flirting and planning adrenalin-packed adventures. Head to the main drag, Caracoles, where most of the restaurants, cafés and bars are concentrated. Blanco (Caracoles 195) is a hip corner joint that serves global delicacies such as ceviche and risotto. The popular Café Adobe (Caracoles 211) has an open-air patio filled with revellers drinking jugs of pisco sour beneath a starry sky as waiters stoke the fire pit. La Estaca (Caracoles 259B) is a lively restaurant and bar with a fireplace, a meat-heavy menu and a fun-loving crowd that stays up late.

SANTIAGO Most North American flights to Chile hub through Santiago, so it's worth adding on a couple of extra

days to experience this attractive Latin capital, with its stunning backdrop of the snow-draped Andes. The Ritz-Carlton (El Alcalde 15, ritzcarlton.com) is the city's premier luxury hotel, a European-inspired behemoth famous for its glass-domed rooftop pool. Pay your respects to Chile's favourite son, poet Pablo Neruda, at La Chascona—his former house, now a museum dedicated to his life—in the hip Bellavista barrio (Fernando Marquez de la Plata). While in the hood, take the funicular at the end of Pío Nono 260 metres up to the Terrazza Bellavista, where you'll be treated to panoramic views of the city and mountains. Get a taste of traditional Chile at the famous Bar Liguria in the Providencia neighbourhood (look for the gaudy flower-mural street frontage). This atmospheric bar and restaurant is a social hub for artists, intellectuals and tourists alike, who come to swill sangria, tuck into hearty meat dishes, and see and be seen. For late-night fun, head to Bar Constitución (Constitución 61), a cool spot in Bellavista that's a nondescript grey sliding door by day, high-octane club by night. —E.S.