



Land of Fire and Ice

FEW COUNTRIES ON THE PLANET ARE AS VARIED AS CHILE. WE TRAVEL FROM ONE END TO THE OTHER FOR TWO COMPLETELY DIFFERENT EXPERIENCES.

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PHOTOGRAPHS
DAFFEY, ALTO ATACAMA,
SINGULAR HOTELS

At its widest point, Chile measures just 350km across, yet stretches 4300km lengthways. It's wedged between mountains and oceans, and bookended by deserts and fjords. Much of it sits beneath – and amongst – volcanoes and glaciers that have shaped and sculpted an astoundingly varied landscape over

countless years. It's the land of fire and ice.

My itinerary goes from one extreme to another, from the dusty, big-sky country of the Atacama – reputed to be the driest desert on the planet – in the north to the treeless plains and windswept mountains of Patagonia in the south. And my journey begins in Santiago.

Several days spent exploring the capital's historical and cultural sights and surrounding wine regions instils a desire to try something more vigorous. I fly north to San Pedro, a popular tourist base for seeing the Atacama, where first

impressions are of a one-horse town populated by backpackers. Innumerable pensiones and hostales cater specifically to the budget crowd but my digs are more salubrious, tucked away in a valley that's far from the tourist hordes.

The access road to the Alto Atacama can best be described as uninspiring. But that doesn't prepare me for the sanctuary inside. Spacious rooms, fine food and wine, a tranquil spa facility and no less than six swimming pools to laze beside tempt me to hole up inside the hotel for the entirety of my stay. It's not the



Andean flamingo, Chaxa Lagoon, Atacama Salt Flat.



Alto Atacama pool area.

facilities I love most though; it's the guest activities, all of which are included in the tariff.

I'm barely five minutes into a chat with the hotel's activities manager when I begin hatching plans to return, for this is my kind of place. There are immersive cultural excursions and photogenic sightseeing tours, as well as plenty of heart-straining hikes and rides for exercise junkies. I slot firmly into the latter category and spend the next three days mountain biking through narrow gorges and hiking over mountain passes

separating high altitude salt lakes. While I'm at it I spot flamingoes and vicuñas beneath smouldering volcanoes and fill my evenings gazing upon a million stars in some of the clearest skies on Earth.

The highlight, though, surprises me, as it is considerably less active. On my last afternoon I join a sunset tour – by minibus – through the otherworldly landscape of the Valle de la Luna, or Moon Valley. From a ridge-top pedestal I marvel at the twisted rock formations and rippled sand dunes inside the Central Canyon then motor across to the rim of a ravine known

as Death Valley. From there, we watch the sun sink behind a cardboard cut-out horizon of perfectly symmetrical 5000- and 6000-metre-high volcanoes while hoeing down drinks and canapés. I can't think of a better way to end my stay.

Extreme opposites

From one end of the country, in Chile's far north, I travel to the other, and it's snowing. From the windswept pampas outside Punta Arenas I arrive in Puerto Bories, where the night sky is pitch black. When I catch my first glimpse of my hotel, it's of a fleet of vehicles parked inside an elongated shed that reminds me of those I once saw filled with farm animals at the Royal Agricultural Show. These sheds housed livestock too. And, like those at the showgrounds, they've also been repurposed.

The redbrick buildings of The Singular Patagonia were once used as a slaughterhouse for sheep before their carcasses were shipped around the continent. The owners bravely decided to incorporate its heritage into its current incarnation as a luxury hotel, leaving much of the original machinery intact and thereby adding a twist to the average holiday stay. Power generators and steam engines that are over 100 years old remain behind glass walls and inside cavernous chambers, and an entire floor has been spared as a gallery space displaying photographs from its industrial past.

The hotel rests on the banks of the Sound of Last Hope, a fjord requiring 200km of navigation before it reaches the Pacific Ocean. Across that fjord are snow-capped Patagonian mountains – and all are visible through the window of my ►

hotel room when I draw my curtains in the morning.

Like the Alto Atacama, excursions and tours are included in the nightly tariff and I join a cruise first up, travelling up the fjord to the foot of two glaciers – Serrano and Balmaceda. Later that afternoon I fossick through caves housing the skeletal remains of ancient megafauna and human troglodytes. I ride a horse for the first time in years, trotting along behind a Patagonian gaucho while condors soar overhead. And then I hike to the base of the three granite spires inside Torres del Paine National Park, taking all day to reach them.

Tierra del Fuego lies further south of here. I'll be joining a cruise next, sailing through this 'Land of Fire' at the tip of the continent. Explorers once branded this archipelago of glacier-capped islands and fjords the 'End of the World'. For me though, it will be a whole new beginning – and a chance for Chile to reveal more of itself. •

Mark Daffey travelled to Chile courtesy of LAN, Eclipse Travel, Alto Atacama, The Singular Hotels and Australis Cruises.



Star trail over the Catarpe Valley, Atacama.



The Singular, Patagonia.

TRAVEL FACTS

Getting There

LAN Airlines operates seven one-stop flights weekly from Sydney to Santiago, Chile, with onward connections to Calama and Punta Arenas.

Travel With

Eclipse Travel has a three-day, two-night package staying at the Alto Atacama hotel from \$1680 per person. It includes meals, drinks and excursions to explore some of northern Chile's spectacular scenery. Eclipse also has a four-day, three-night package staying at The Singular Patagonia from \$3678 per person. All meals, drinks, expeditions, use of the spa facilities and transfers are included.

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