

SOUTH AMERICA



Adventure at your leisure

There's no shortage of outdoor activities in this sustainable luxury hotel ensconced in the Chilean wilderness, but only if you can pull yourself away from the stylish rooms, writes **Nicole Foster**

AM the first one to admit that when you think of Chile and adventure, Patagonia springs to mind.

Images of glaciers, craggy peaks and vast, rugged landscapes tend to predominate, but as it turns out, Patagonia doesn't have the monopoly on adventure, or landscape. If you ask the Chileans, they will tell you that Pucon, at the northern end of the Lake District, is the adventure capital of Chile.

What Pucon lacks in the form of glaciers, it more than makes up for with volcanoes, active ones at that. Pucon bears an uncanny resemblance to Queenstown, New Zealand. It's perched on the edge of Villarrica Lake, under the smouldering gaze of the volcano with the same name.

And here, if you can't hike it, you can bike it; if you can't sail it, you can raft or kayak it; if you can't ski it, you can snowboard it; if you can't ride it, you can zip line it.

You will find the full gamut of accommodation in Pucon but in October, 2014, the Hacienda Hotel Vira Vira threw open its imposing gates and took the "all inclusive" tag to a whole new level. Only 10 minutes drive from Pucon, the hotel is part luxury lodge, part holistic retreat and by far the most opulent way to explore the best that the upper Lake District has to offer.

Vira Vira means "Herb of Life" in the indigenous Mapuche language. And when you see the location of the hotel, surrounded by the Lúcuru River and 40ha of wilderness, you too will feel the medicinal qualities of the landscape.

Swiss owners Michael and Claudia Paravicini were so drawn to the location, that they packed up and relocated their family here four years ago. After a very successful career in international banking, travelling a million air miles a year and staying in hotels all over the world, their vision was clear – to create a hacienda-style hotel, like nothing else seen before in Chile.

They had no hotel or farming experience whatsoever; just a love of the land and a dream to create something luxurious, yet



sustainable; chic but comfortable; something world-class, yet undeniably Chilean. Mission accomplished.

So with the help of a local architect and builder, Michael and his stylish wife, Claudia, designed all the decor, determined to showcase the

talents of local artisans, using native woods and one-off art works. So popular are some of the design choices, that soon they will open a boutique on-site, so that guests can take home a little piece of Vira Vira with them.

Life at Vira Vira revolves around the opulent main lodge with the restaurant, bar and library ensconced here. The activities desk staff will help you plan your itinerary, catering it exclusively to your interests. So whether that includes floating down the river on a raft or kayak, fly fishing, or hiking to a lake, the wonderful staff will turn your wishlist into a to-do list.

The sustainability of the property is an underlying theme and guests are encouraged to explore the farm and dairy, as that is part of the Vira Vira experience. In order to be as self-sufficient as possible, they farm turkeys, chickens, ducks, geese, wild boar, cows, sheep and goats.



GO2 CHILE

GETTING THERE

LAN Airlines operates seven one-stop flights each week from Sydney to Santiago, Chile, via Auckland, with onward connections to Temuco (100km from Pucon). LAN also offers non-stop flights between Sydney and Santiago every Monday, Wednesday and Saturday in codeshare partnership with Qantas. For more information or to make a booking see your local travel agent or call LAN reservations from Australia on 1800 126 038, or visit lan.com

STAYING THERE

The Vira Vira Hacienda Hotel starts from \$A360 a person a night, including breakfast and dinner. A three-night full board package including all meals, open bar, airport transfers and a selection of daily excursions with bilingual guides starts from \$A2115 a person. Prices are based on two people sharing a hotel suite. To book visit your travel agent or on +56 45 237 4000, or visit hotelviravira.com

STUNNING SPOT: (clockwise from main) Hacienda Hotel Vira Vira; volcano Villarrica lets off steam; climbing Villarrica for a closer look; the horse whisperer Rodolfo Coombs; a suite at Vira Vira; and one of their many hot tubs. Pictures: Getty Images

However, volcanic activity meant it was closed.

There is a more serene volcanic activity of offer – the Los Pozones thermal rock pools. Not only are they in a stunning location beside a river, they are the only geothermal pools that are in their natural environment; all the others in the area have been incorporated into hotels.

The most memorable activity for me was meeting Rodolfo Coombs at his ranch, Huepil Malal (Rainbow Horses). He is a third-generation horseman who trained the Spanish Olympic equestrian team for 16 years. He is the real-deal "gaucho" or "Huasso" (Chilean cowboy). His way with horses is a joy to behold.

His 200ha ranch is home to 45 well-trained Chilean horses called "criollo". You do not need to be an experienced rider, as you could not be in more capable hands.

Rodolfo's horses will comfortably take you through the most pristine Andean mountain scenery; and en route make sure you take a turn riding next to the great man, so that he can regale you with some of his wonderful stories.

On a second property nearby they grow wheat, oats, rye, potatoes and honey for the hotel and the animals. The cows are milked daily, keeping the fully certified dairy in constant production of milk, yoghurt, cream as well as an amazing selection of artisanal cheeses.

The veggie patch will make even the greenest of thumbs feel inadequate. In perfect rows you will find cabbages the size of watermelons, fennel, asparagus, zucchini and rhubarb, and the list of organic produce goes on and on.

It is no surprise then, with so much emphasis on the organic produce, that meal times are a four-course culinary celebration. The kitchen is run by chef Mario Arancibia, who creates a daily menu with two meat and one vegetarian option for both lunch and dinner, paired with the perfect Chilean wine for each course.

Vira Vira has 21 guest rooms. There are six suites in the main building, 12 opulent villas along the river, and three rooms in the owners' hacienda that cater more for families.

The split-level villas are the highlight, with both an indoor and outdoor bath tub overlooking the river and a fireplace stacked with wood.

Activities can be as strenuous as you want. For a stroll through forest, the hike to Lago Escondida takes you over bridges made of petrified wood and past 1000-year-old trees called Monkey Puzzles. A more heart-pumping hike is the one to El Claro waterfall.

Another incentive for making it to the end of any of the activities are the smiling Vira Vira staff, armed with freshly baked treats.

One of the most dramatic climbs you can do is up to the crater of the Villarrica volcano.