

OCTOBER 2023 • EXPLORING OTHERWORLDLY CHILE • 24 HOURS IN LAS VEGAS • BELGRADE CITY GUIDE • EXPOSÉ: THE ROYAL CONCERTGEBOUW ORCHESTRA • YOUR FREE COPY TO TAKE HOME

HOLLAND HERALD

"As you enter Chile's Torres del Paine National Park, the skyline takes your breath away"



EDGES OF

From the mountains of Patagonia to the Atacama Desert: let's travel to the remote and otherworldly ends of Chile.

Text and photography Jurriaan Teulings

THE WORLD



Chile



Chile, as you may have noticed on the map, is not very wide and incredibly long, easily spanning the distance between New York and Bogotá. Hidden from much of the rest of the South American continent behind the mighty Andes Mountains, it's largely empty. Of humanity that is; when it comes to natural resources and beauty, it's a very different story. Take the Atacama Desert and Torres del Paine National Park for example. Located in the country's north and far south respectively, these vast regions are so empty, and their landscapes so strange, that you might wake up there after a long trip and think that you'd left the planet entirely. In my book, that's a good thing, worth following to the end of the world.

But first, a fun dose of humanity in Santiago. The nation's capital, which is home to roughly a third of its population of nearly 20 million, is conveniently located halfway between the two. I've booked a night in Lastarria, a lively area full of museums, cafés and markets. The streets of beautifully preserved classical architecture are proud and posh, but the vibe is bohemian. Chileans are said to be a bit more formal, and less gregarious, than their neighbours across the Andes, but such generalisations are out of the question here. There's irreverent street art and Santa Lucía Hill, the site the city was founded upon. I spend an afternoon browsing the array of inviting bookshops, antique shops and experimental art galleries along José Victorino Lastarria, the neighbourhood's cobblestoned artery. Finally, feeling lazy from my jet lag, I wander across the river and take the funicular to San Cristóbal Hill to enjoy panoramic views of Santiago against a backdrop of the Andes, set ablaze in spectacular oranges by the setting sun.

It's not the end of the world

My first order of business the next day is to fly to Punta Arenas, Chile's southernmost city. Overlooking the churning waters of the Strait of Magellan, the narrow passage that separates mainland South America from Tierra del

Fuego, Punta Arenas is often referred to as 'the end of the world'. Calling it 'the end of civilisation' might be more suitable, however, because the planet continues beyond it, just with a lot more penguins than people. The last time I visited the city, it was to board a cruise to Antarctica. This time, my destination – the Explora Lodge – is another five hours' drive north. The empty road across the windswept steppe highlights the staggering size of Chilean Patagonia, where everything man-made shrinks into insignificance, including the little roadside restaurant where we stop for a scrambled eggs and lemon pie. As we enter Torres del Paine National Park, a granite skyline appears on the horizon. This is the famous Paine Massif that was borne of fire and earth, and chiselled into perfection by millions of years of rain, wind and ice.

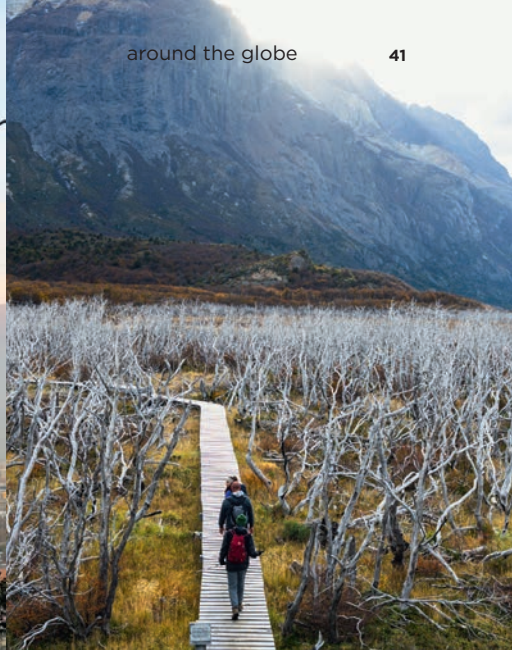
The Explora Lodge is impressively remote, perched on a hillside overlooking a lake – flanked on one side by rapids – its windows framing the autumn scenery like a Bob Ross painting. Autumn has arrived; a wilderness of greens, yellows, and reds surrounds the blue waters of Lake Pehoé. As I admire the curved, wooden interior of the hotel lobby, a woman with long curls introduces herself as Malele. It's her last week of six years working as a private guide in the park, and she intends to savour every last second spent here. Along with two other recent arrivals, she invites me for a quick introductory hike, following an elevated path of creaky wooden planks into a low deciduous forest near the hotel. Peering into the underbrush, I ask her about the pumas in the park. "Not here," she answers. "But you might see them tomorrow on your excursion."

Just after sunset, I watch the scenery change from my hotel room. A crescent moon rises straight above the black-tipped Horns of Paine across the lake. The Horns, I'm told, are dramatic examples of 'clast contact', a rare geological circumstance where dark sedimentary rock rests on lighter-coloured granite bases. »

Previous pages
The Salt Mountains
in the Atacama
Desert

**Right page, top
from left to right**
The Bellavista
neighbourhood in
Santiago; view
from San Cristóbal
Hill in Santiago;
skeletal forest in
Torres del Paine
National Park.

Bottom Moonrise
over the Horns of
Paine



**ENJOY SPECTACULAR VIEWS
WHEREVER YOU ARE IN THE NATURAL
WONDER THAT IS CHILE**



A wide-angle landscape photograph of a turquoise lake in a desert valley. The lake is the central focus, surrounded by a sandy and rocky shoreline. In the background, two large, brown, conical mountains rise against a clear blue sky. The foreground is a dry, rocky desert floor covered with sparse, low-lying vegetation, including clumps of yellowish grass and small green shrubs. The overall scene is a stark, beautiful representation of a high-altitude desert environment.

**YOU MIGHT WAKE UP IN THE ATACAMA
DESERT AND THINK THAT
YOU'VE LEFT THE PLANET ENTIRELY**



Above Grey Glacier in Torres del Paine National Park
Left page One of the Lagunas Altiplanicas, 90km from San Pedro de Atacama

SAN PEDRO DE ATACAMA IS
A POPULAR DEPARTURE POINT
FOR TRIPS INTO THE DESERT



The next day we drive to Estancia 2 de Enero, a ranch about 90 minutes by road. On the way, we spot a pair of condors basking on a ridge in the distance, drying their wings. As we climb a hill to get a closer look, we hear the alarm calls of a herd of guanacos: the wild relatives of llamas that flock to these parts. A puma must be nearby, but alas, it remains elusive. At the ranch, which is run by *huasos*, the Chilean counterparts of cowboys and gauchos, I can't get a word out of the silent horseman who sets up a wooden staircase for me to awkwardly mount a mare, apart from 'Ursula', the horse's name. I'm an inexperienced rider, and judging by Malele's disapproving looks, perhaps a little too permissive of Ursula's wishes to stray off the path in search for a juicy bite of grass. My excuse is that I'm too distracted by the views of the Massif in the distance. Seen from this side of the park, the sharp peaks of the granite towers are shrouded in clouds and rainbows, like a giant's teeth biting into candyfloss.

The next morning, I'm ready for an 11km hike to Grey Glacier, a massive tongue of the Southern Patagonian Ice Field, the great architect of this landscape. To get to the trailhead, we first take the hotel's private catamaran across Lake Pehoe. Bouncing across the water at the break of dawn, the silhouettes of the Paine Massif slowly emerge from the darkness, articulated by deep blues and electric pinks. The twilight lingers as we enter a strange skeletal forest. Here, my guide of the day, a young Santiago transplant named Javier, tells me about the devastating fire of 2011. Reportedly, it was caused by a tourist who started a fire to burn some toilet paper, and quickly got out of control, lasting several weeks and destroying large swathes of the park. Twelve years on, and the forest's bleached skeletons are poking through a green undergrowth of fragile saplings, creating a landscape that's desolate and hopeful. After a short climb, we arrive at the shore of Grey Lake, and soon after, the glacier that feeds the lake appears in the distance, almost too bright to look at. Our hike ends after three hours – just as my legs are starting to

protest – at a beach where several icebergs have run aground. A small ferry arrives to take us on a tour along the glacier wall. The bar serves cocktails on glacier ice: pisco sours enriched with purple calafate berries, a local fruit that, once tasted, is said to ensure your return. That's the kind of superstition I'm all too happy to engage in.

Out of this world

Even by air, travelling to the other end of Chile takes a full day. From Punta Arenas, it's a 3.5-hour flight to Santiago, and another two to Calama, a mining city in the Atacama Desert. This is one of the driest deserts on the planet; some valleys haven't seen rain in decades. From Calama airport, it's about an hour's drive to San Pedro de Atacama, an adobe oasis town that's a popular departure point for trips into the high-altitude desert, a place so alien that it often resembles Mars.

A short walk from the town centre, another Explora hotel awaits. All Explora hotels in Chile are set in almost inconceivably remote locations, often pioneering responsible tourism and cultivating a close relationship with the local communities. In Atacama, this resulted in the Puritama Conservation Reserve, a 6,000-hectare project to protect, promote and develop the rich natural and cultural heritage of the Atacama Desert. This is where I spend the next morning navigating a rocky path at the bottom of the canyon, where the river is obscured by a profusion of greenery. As I'm still adjusting to the altitude, it can be challenging, but a series of hot springs at the end of the trail make it worth the effort. What started to look like an ordeal becomes a heavenly jump into clear, warm waters followed by a tasty picnic. That afternoon, after a luxurious lunch and a blissful nap at the hotel, we drive to the Atacama Salt Flats: the remnants of an inland sea that reach up to a kilometre in thickness and are surprisingly full of life. Flocks of flamingos, as pink as the evening sky, reflect along with the volcanoes in the briny shallows. »

Top San Pedro de Atacama

Bottom (from left to right) On the hike to Volcan Blanco; lunch at Puritama Hot Springs; a geyser in El Tatio

**THE SALT FLATS ARE REMNANTS
OF AN INLAND SEA AND
ARE SURPRISINGLY FULL OF LIFE**



Left page Flamingos at the Atacama Salt Flats

The next day, I'm acclimatised for a long hike through one of the most surreal landscapes of the Atacama Desert. It starts at a breathtaking altitude of 4,200m. Here, the geysers of El Tatio comprise the third-largest geothermal field in the world, fed by the magmatic chamber of an estimated 1,300 cubic km that feeds 44 active volcanoes in the area. It's a sputtering and gurgling landscape under billowing clouds of steam. The geysers come in various sizes and colours but are all menacingly hot. Despite the heat and the altitude, there's life. As Moritz, the German-Chilean guide who has accompanied me, explains: "We have cyanobacteria and extremophiles, which are bacteria that can withstand very harsh environmental conditions, such as cold winds, ice, hot water, and high concentrations of UV light."

The rest of the hike is less challenging than expected, as it's mostly downhill, first following a zigzagging trail down a rocky mountainside, into a wide valley. Following the moss-padded banks of a geothermically heated river, we pass unique fauna, such as yareta, a strange plant that looks like someone stacked an art installation of fluffy green cushions against the canyon wall. In the distance, flocks of vicuñas keep an eye on us until we happen upon the road where the hotel van has been waiting for us. While we enjoy a final picnic and a celebratory beer, Moritz plays a Chilean folk song on his phone. "It's for the grey gulls," he says, pointing at the birds that have been trying to steal our cheese. "They're a long way from the sea, aren't they?" The song 'Lejos del Amor' ('Far from Love') is by a well-known Chilean musical group named Illapu, who blend traditional Andean music with contemporary elements. Yes, the gulls may be far from love, but for me, there is so much beauty left to explore here, it's going to be very hard to leave. «

Jurriaan Teulings visited Chile at the invitation of Explora Hotels and Sapa Pana Travel. The latter is a Dutch travel agency specialising in tailor-made trips to Latin America.



WIDELY PUBLISHED TRAVEL WRITER JURRIAN TEULINGS HAS BEEN EVERYWHERE (EVEN ANTARCTICA). HERE ARE HIS TIPS FOR CHILE.

Jurriaan's favourites

Across the Altiplano

In 2011, I travelled by jeep from San Pedro de Atacama to the Uyuni Salt Flat in Bolivia. It was a wild, off-road adventure through some of the most surreal landscapes I've ever seen. That was on a shoestring, but nowadays Explora offer La Travesía, a seven-day package that includes luxurious lodges and fabulous meals along the way.
explora.com

A hiker's dream

During my stay at Explora Lodge, I followed parts of the W Circuit in Torres del Paine National Park, which includes glaciers, forests and lakes. The French Valley section comes highly recommended if you've got the stamina for a 20km hike. The entire route typically takes four to five days to complete, with excellent camping sites scattered throughout the park.

Matetic Vineyards

On my way home, I spent a night at this wonderful biodynamic winery close to Santiago, which offers wine

tours and tastings in a beautiful, cool valley close to the Pacific. Even if you don't spend the night here; a lunch at the restaurant is well worth a visit.
matetic.com

The Singular

Housed within a beautifully restored 20th-century neoclassical building with a rooftop terrace that has amazing views, The Singular is one of the prettiest hotels in Santiago's Lastarria neighbourhood.
thesingular.com

Bahá'í Temple of South America

This somewhat extraterrestrial, dome-shaped building, sitting on a hill on the eastern outskirts of Santiago, was crafted from marble and cast glass. Its interior is serene and ethereal, honouring the unity of all religions and all humankind.
Av. Diagonal Las Torres 2000, Peñalolén

Demencia

I love this odd, circus-themed gastrobar in Vitacura, one of the most fashionable neighbourhoods in Santiago. It's the latest project of Benjamín Nast, one of the most awarded chefs in Chile. The

menu is a carnival of local ingredients with international influences, such as ceviche, flat iron steak and risotto.
Av. Vitacura 3520

Sculpture Park

This outdoor museum on the banks of the Mapocho River in Santiago's Providencia neighbourhood, is a great place to relax among 30 sculptures by Chilean artists.

Lunch highlight

From tuna tartare to bao buns, everything was delicious about my lunch at the authentic Ambrosia Bistro in Santiago's Providencia neighbourhood.
ambrosiabistro.cl

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