

Luxury travel

How to see the best of Chile in style

Mountains, volcanoes, deserts... and some of the most lavish hotels in South America. Tom Chesshyre enjoys a luxury tour around Chile

I am flying up a mountain attached to a "sling shot", a metal bar with four seats attached to two long wires, well above 3,000m in the Chilean Andes. My skis slide on the snow, providing balance as I zoom along. It's an unusual feeling, as though I'm skiing upwards on this steep off-piste slope. Bumps in the contours of the mountain make my skis hop about as I cling on, wondering quite how all this will work out.

Just about OK, is the answer. Somehow or other my guide, Shannon, and I make it to the top. The air is thin. The sun beams down. The views across Laguna del Inca, which acts as a mirror reflecting the mountains, are splendid. We tear downwards across slopes marked with bumps, before slipping between two rocky cliff faces and plunging into a wide-open slope leading to base camp at the marvellous, five-star Hotel Portillo.

One of the most exclusive ski resorts in South America certainly has its hairy moments. And now is the time to go. The ski season runs from mid-June to mid-October in Chile, during its winter, when conditions are usually dependable. However, if you're going all that way, taking advantage of the new direct British Airways flights to Santiago (14 and a half hours), it's best to explore more of the country than just its ski slopes. Over ten days it's possible to see the capital, Santiago, the valleys and salt flats of the desolate Atacama desert, and even visit one of the continent's most active volcanoes, on the edge of Patagonia.

Skiing during the British summer is an odd sensation. With a heatwave at home, here I am taking lifts into the peaks of the Andes beneath a perfect blue sky, sharing slopes with the social set of South America — many of my fellow guests at Hotel Portillo are Argentine ranch owners or Brazilian multimillionaires (quite a few from Sao Paulo), not to mention the great and the good (and the fashion set) of Chile itself. There is only one hotel at the resort and the maximum number of guests is 450.

This is very much a South American institution, dating from 1949 and still run by the family who set it up, the Purcells. For a while back in the 20th century it was, whispers have it, a favourite place for high rollers at impromptu, very discreet (and illegal) poker games.

The skiing here is best suited to the advanced who venture off-piste, although there are 35 on-piste runs with many fine slopes for beginners and intermediates. After a day of "sling shots" there appears to be a definite pattern for how to "do" Portillo, which is a two-hour drive up a very twisty road from Santiago, and just five minutes from the border with Argentina.

The pattern goes like this. Just before skiing down the mountain, which is popular with members of the US ski team who come for summer practice, most people stop off at the Tio Bob café, with its stupendous views across Laguna del Inca... and order a pisco sour on the snow terrace. This very quaffable cocktail, consisting of lime, pisco liquor and egg white, originated in Peru, although it has long been a favourite in Chile too. Tio Bob's is the perfect place to drink one while sharing a picnic table with fellow skiers — on my first afternoon I was joined by a couple from Boulder, Colorado, who had made millions with an internet start-up company.

Then it's down to the hot tubs by the lake, where thirtysomethings mingle in the smaller tubs while families enjoy the bigger one. This is followed by a further pisco sour or glass of local carménère red wine in one of the old leather chairs by the fireplace in the hotel bar, and a three-course meal served by straight-backed waiters in red jackets in the formal restaurant (you get the same table for each meal). Some of the staff have been at the hotel for more than 50 years and many of the guests have been coming for almost as long. Afterwards, it's back to the bar, if you have the energy, for live rock'n'roll, which is played each night. Portillo is a hit with South America's rock set — and sometimes guests join in for an impromptu jam.



Tierra Atacama Hotel, in San Pedro de Atacama



Hotel Antumalal, looking out over Lake Villarrica

All very relaxing. It would be easy to settle into this Portillo routine for a full week, but my next stop-off in Chile proves just as addictive. After a two-hour flight from Santiago to Calama in the north and about an hour's drive, I reach the Tierra Atacama Hotel in the pretty little oasis town of San Pedro de Atacama. And what a place it is. Tierra Atacama is the sister hotel of Hotel Portillo and it faces a mountain range dominated by the cone-shaped peak of Licancabur, a dormant volcano.

There are just 32 rooms at this super-cool design hotel that opened in 2008. The minimalist, modernist rooms have four-poster beds, cow-hide rugs, slick bathrooms, and terraces looking out on to the incredible scenery. The air is so dry and the scenery so rugged here that Nasa runs tests in these parts to assess conditions on Mars. The Atacama desert covers 41,000 square miles along a 600-mile strip of land by the Pacific coast. It is considered to be the driest non-polar desert on earth.

Chile really is a remarkable country in terms of its terrain. From top to bottom the distance is about 2,690 miles, as long as the US is wide — or, as my *Rough Guide* puts it, the distance from Norway to Nigeria. Yet it is rarely more than about 125 miles wide.

Guests at Tierra Atacama begin each stay with a consultation with a member of staff about what they would like to do — all

excursions, a series of hikes and sightseeing trips, are included. The consultation is conducted in a brilliant open-plan room with low-slung sofas, open fireplaces, a bar (drinks included) and a restaurant. Outside is a deck that leads past a hot tub and an infinity pool to a bijou spa with a heated indoor pool, saunas and steam rooms.

It's extremely sociable. On my first hike to some brilliant hot springs, I make friends with a couple from New York (him, head of IT at the Chicago Mercantile Exchange; her, former head of HSBC in South America). We all leap into the water and then have a very posh picnic with smoked salmon and fine Chilean wine. The next day it's a trip to salt flats in the company of another new pal, the head of global litigation for a big insurance firm. Then on my last day I enjoy a ten-mile hike through a remote valley with Gustavo, who is effectively my private guide because no one else has signed up. We begin at 4,000m, before dropping to 3,000m and the village of Rio Grande.

Red cliffs plunge from plateaus. Andean geese glide by. Cacti rise from rocky slopes. We stop at an abandoned village for a cup of tea from a flask, where we learn via a radio message that a puma has just been spotted right by the start of our morning's walk. "Sometimes you see Bolivian mountaineers transporting cocaine," Gustavo

tells me. "These things go on. Some people, not me, take cocaine in San Pedro. Nobody judges them."

I take a look around San Pedro, a touristy place with clothes shops sprawling across the narrow high street, a church and a few good little restaurants. In one of these I sample *pataska*, a lovely pork stew with chunky corn, onion and potato, served with spicy salsa on the side.

Then I fly south to Pucon, a town nestled by a lake next to Villarrica volcano, which is smoking happily away when I arrive, great wafts sweeping down across the streets. Here, I am staying at Hotel Antumalal. This is another classic. While Hotel Portillo was traditional and determinedly old school, and Tierra Atacama contemporary and slick, Antumalal is in a classic Bauhaus style. It overlooks Lake Villarrica and rooms have a log-cabin feel, with high windows making the most of the scenery.

I'm here for another taste of skiing, but I'm out of luck. The idea was to hike up the volcano (which takes about four hours) and ski down after marvelling at the lava gurgling in the crater at the top, but the

Need to know

Tom Chesshyre was a guest of Scott Dunn (020 8682 5030, scottdunn.com), which has a 14-night tour of Chile from £8,500pp, with full-board accommodation at Hotel Portillo (including ski hire and lift pass), full-board accommodation and all activities at Tierra Atacama, half-board accommodation at Antumalal, and B&B accommodation at Luciano K. Direct international flights with British Airways, domestic flights, a private half-day Santiago city tour and private road transfers are included



weather takes a turn for the worse. Instead I join a guide named Gonzalo for a wonderful forest hike to a pair of remote glacial lakes. Trees stretch to the heavens as the path winds upwards, before the lakes open up with cliffs rising on the far side.

Yes, it's a pity we missed the skiing, but this is almost as good, and it's fun to wander around Pucon afterwards, with its boutique shops and jolly steak restaurants.

Santiago is left for last, staying at my fourth hotel, the excellent art deco Luciano K, close to the Bellavista neighbourhood in which the poet Pablo Neruda lived. His house, kept exactly as it was, is now a good little museum.

I learn all about his death shortly after the coup that heralded the rise of General Pinochet (Neruda's funeral in 1973 served as a kind of protest against Pinochet). I also visit La Moneda, the presidential palace where President Allende, Pinochet's predecessor, died during the coup; there's a fine statue of him outside. And I check out the great central market, which seems to stretch on for ever in a series of halls filled with every fruit and vegetable under the sun.

It has been a whistle-stop tour of Chile — but what a tour and what a country. And I haven't even seen Patagonia proper. Go for longer... or just go again (as I intend to, for another shot at Villarrica).



Villarrica volcano



A church in the village of Rio Grande