

ATACAMA ADVENTURE



Abigail Butcher experiences the famous high-altitude desert in Chile

The sun is slowly setting on the volcanoes, painting them orange against the fading blue of the sky. It's an endless sky: clear and uncluttered by even the suggestion of a cloud. I take a sip of wine, stretch out my weary legs in the hot tub and vow to remember this view for a long time to come.

I'm in the Atacama Desert in Chile, enjoying a luxurious private hot-tub experience at Tierra Atacama Hotel & Spa, after a 15km high-altitude hike that certainly tested my legs enough to appreciate the warm, healing water of the hot tub, scented with lavender and filled with desert salts.

After feasting on a breakfast of scrambled eggs, the ubiquitous avocado, and hot tea, we had hopped on a bus and begun our hike from the high, remote village of Machuca, set at 4,000m. Following the course of the Machuca River, we spied Andean geese, flamingos, llamas, viscachas (like a large chinchilla), parakeets and finches as we walked down the valley,

the sun just beginning to warm the air.

Life in the Atacama is dusty and harsh and, in the areas where the river was still or tumbled over rocks, it had iced up overnight, leaving me to marvel more than once at how the pink flamingos, whom I associate with warmer climes, manage to live in this place, heads constantly in the water, filtering for brine shrimp.

DESERT DELIGHTS

We stopped to rest three times during the five-hour hike, to drink water, remove layers and eat nuts and fruit carried for us by guides JP and Paula. They checked constantly whether I or my hiking companions Mike and Steve were feeling the effects of altitude but, unlike climbing a mountain at 4,000m, I felt no shortage of breath, just faintly irritated by how static my hair had become in the dry desert air!

As we moved down to a lower altitude, we started to see cacti growing on the

sides of the canyon and passed the deserted village of Peñaliri, one of many in Chile. People have left these small, mountain villages for the big city where there is more plentiful water and employment, and life is less harsh.

Finally, as my feet began to tire, we caught the welcome sight of Tierra Atacama's shining red transporter with its driver, Emma — who had grown up in Peñaliri — laying out a picnic lunch and camping chairs on which we could rest after the morning's exertions.

SPECTACULAR SIGHTS

The Machuca to Río Grande hike is one of a dozen excursions offered by this gorgeous hotel set in the desert at 2,400m, just outside the village of San Pedro de Atacama. The moment you're enveloped by the hotel's cool, organic interior, one of the two head guides — Mike or Max — sits down with you to discuss which adventures you'd like to do during your stay. There's no requirement for guests to do anything more than enjoy the good (and rather plentiful) food, luxuriate in the spa or sit in their room enjoying the view, but faced with a list of wonderful-sounding excursions, your time here suddenly looks too short.

Choose from visiting the iconic Atacama salt flats and Chaxa Lagoon to learn about the flamingos and ecosystem — as I did with a fantastic guide, Juan, who used to lead scientific trips in the High Andes before settling in San Pedro with his wife and family — or stargazing in the desert, where the lack of light pollution offers spectacular views of the night sky.

There are biking trips and horseback riding, multiple hiking options and, should you time it right, the option of climbing a volcano. During my stay, the tops of the volcanoes were covered in snow, making hiking without ropes a near impossibility, so I settled upon the Machuca-Río Grande hike instead, which guide Paula assured me was far more interesting anyway.

SUPERB TREATMENTS

It's important not to get too carried away with excursions so you leave enough time to enjoy Tierra Atacama's fantastic Uma Spa. There are indoor and outdoor pools, a Jacuzzi and the private hot tub, where cheese, fruit and wine is served. You can choose between adding desert salts and lavender to the tub's water, as I did to relax after a long hike, or goat's milk to soften the skin, with rose, mint or cocoa!

I also had a fabulous Tierra Ritual treatment, carried out by Yeyme (pronounced Jamie) from Peru. This treatment uses local products, beginning with a full-body exfoliation using desert salts and chocolate that smelt so good I barely wanted to wash it off, followed by a full-body desert clay and chocolate mask. Then, I was wrapped up in a warm cocoon of towels, the mask applied to my face, and left to bake for 20 minutes. I promptly fell asleep, so heavily that I jumped when Yeyme re-entered the room.

Sensing that my neck and shoulders were incredibly sore following a long journey, Yeyme finished the treatment with a relaxing massage, performing Reiki over

particularly troublesome areas by cupping her hands over my skin to generate incredible heat.

There are also yoga classes three mornings a week; these clashed with my excursions so I ran out of time to put them to test, though if you're really keen on fitting yoga into your schedule, it's possible to book the instructor for a private session.

If this all sounds sublime, it really is. Aside from the spa treatments and private hot tub, everything at Tierra Atacama is included in the room price, so you can enjoy excursions, wine, beer and a selection of spirits, tea and coffee, along with three meals a day, to your heart's content. The hotel's drivers will also whisk you in to explore San Pedro at a moment's notice, so don't miss out on wandering around the streets and shops during your stay.

TRUE LUXURY

I'd spent the previous week in the ski resort of Portillo and the Atacama's slower pace of life was the perfect antidote to the hard skiing and hard partying for which the Chilean resort is famous. Hotel Portillo and Tierra Atacama — along with two other hotels, Tierra Chiloé and Tierra Patagonia — are owned by the same family, the Purcells, and they know how to get hospitality just right. Staff outnumber guests and the service is spot on; the only thing guests must do is ensure their stay is



Relaxing rooms have private terraces offering views of the Licancabur Volcano

long enough to enjoy the hotel and its high-altitude desert surroundings to the full.

Writing this on the plane back home, I'm sad I didn't have time to climb that volcano or ride on horseback through Atacama's Moon Valley, but I know I'll be back.

FACT FILE

● The Ultimate Travel Company offers an 11-day trip to Chile including one night B&B at Luciano K in Santiago, a city tour, transfers, plus a seven-night package at Tierra Atacama including full board and activities in small groups. Prices start from £4,905 per person and include direct flights with British Airways and domestic flights with LATAM; theultimatecompany.co.uk.



Stunning mountain views by the outdoor pool