



Torres del Paine National Park



Colourful stairs in Valparaíso



Rapa Nui

LAND OF EXTREMES

CHILE'S NATURAL WONDERS MAKE IT EVERY ADVENTURER'S DREAM. WHAT'S MORE, THE PEOPLE ARE CHARMING, THE CULTURE IS INFECTIOUS AND THE WINE IS TOP-NOTCH

By Nick Dall



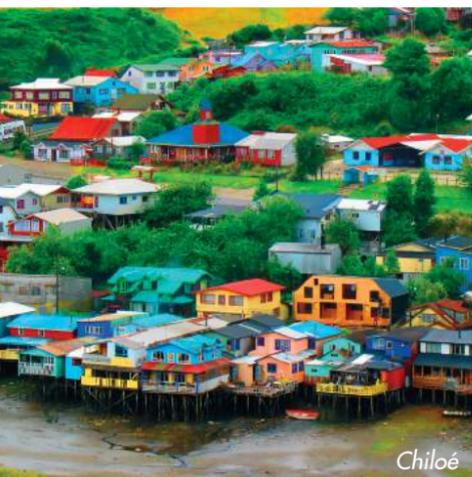
Measuring 4 270 km from north to south, but averaging only 177 km in width, Chile is home to both the driest desert on the planet and some of the world's most prolific glaciers. Wedged between the bountiful Pacific Ocean and the towering Andes, this is Mother Nature on a grand scale. There's kayaking, skiing, fishing and trekking galore, but there's also oodles of culture, food and fun to be had.

Chile enjoys the same seasons as South Africa and it's one of the few places out there where the rand will actually get you somewhere. So, what are you waiting for? Here's a guide to exploring Chile in all its extremes.

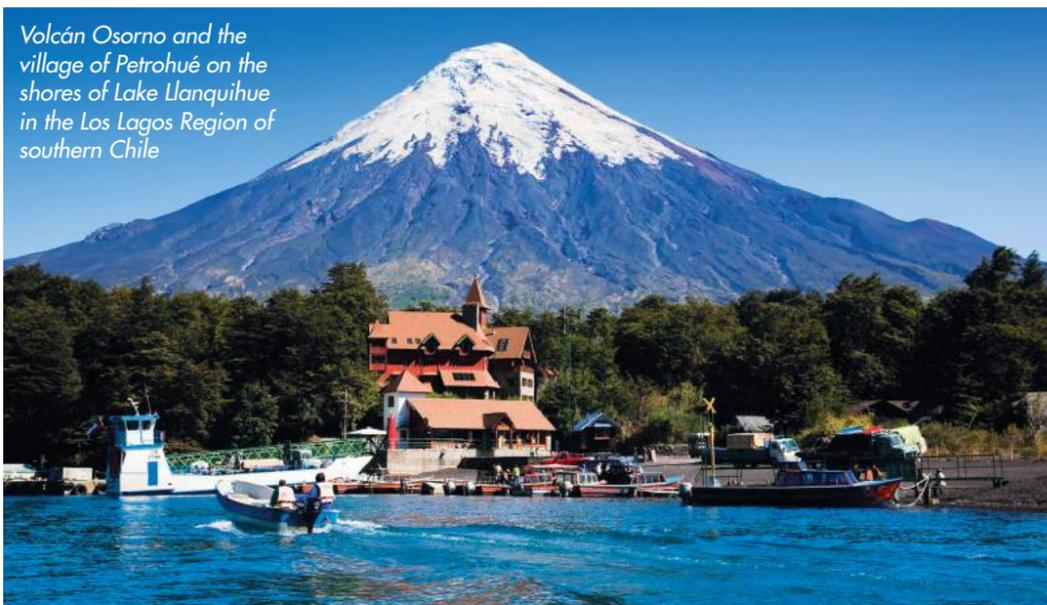
For nature lovers

Chile spans nearly 40 degrees of latitude and offers some of the most diverse climates and landscapes on the planet. The Atacama Desert is like the Karoo on steroids: some of its weather stations have never recorded precipitation, and the snow-capped volcanoes, high-altitude geysers and freakish rock formations make it the perfect location for photography, stargazing and simple contemplation.

A little further south, you'll stumble upon the beaches of La Serena (rustic) and Viña del Mar (snazzier), but be warned: the water in Chile is almost as cold as Clifton's! The pastoral Central Valley surrounding the capital Santiago is



Chiloé



Volcán Osorno and the village of Petrohué on the shores of Lake Llanquihue in the Los Lagos Region of southern Chile



GETTING THERE

South African Airways flies daily from Joburg to São Paulo, Brazil. From there it's easy to get a connecting flight through to Santiago (about four hours).

GETTING AROUND

Public transport in Chile is excellent. The taxis, long-distance buses and domestic airlines are all fantastic and the subway system used in Santiago is world class.

SAFETY

Chile is far safer than South Africa. With that said, always exercise common sense.

TIME ZONE

Chile is five hours behind South Africa.

WEATHER

Even in summer, Patagonia, Tierra del Fuego and the Atacama can get very cold.

CURRENCY

One rand gets you about 50 Chilean pesos.



known for its wine and apple farms – with the imposing Andes providing a uniquely spectacular and unexpected backdrop.

South of the capital is the magnificent Lake District: a majestic fairy-tale land of Halcyon lakes, evergreen forests, jagged peaks and crystalline rivers. ‘Like Switzerland without the Swiss,’ a jovial Irish hostel owner observed. You could easily spend two weeks in the Lake District without running out of beautiful places to see.

Next is Patagonia proper, an expansive, underpopulated region, which spans across the southern halves of both Chile and Argentina. In winter, Patagonia can be pretty harsh, but during summer, its fjords, islands, glaciers and cliffs put on a show much better than anything Hollywood could come up with. The whole region is incredible, but the Torres del Paine National Park, with its soaring mountain peaks and mirror-smooth lakes, will totally redefine your understanding of the word ‘stunning’.

Finally, you reach Tierra del Fuego, a mythical island of extreme beauty and hardship. Tierra del Fuego is the closest continental landmass to Antarctica, and even today it retains an air of adventure and heroism, which more than justifies the extremely high prices!

For thrill seekers

All of that nature means Chile has an outlet for every kind of adrenalin junkie, but it does have a self-proclaimed adventure capital too. Pucón is ideally located on the shores of picturesque Lago Villarrica, surrounded by forests, mountains and national parks. Its biggest drawback is the opportunity to hike to the edge of the crater of still-smouldering Villarrica, a volcano that, at

2 847m above sea level, can be reached in a day. Be sure to hire a guide though, as the hike requires crampons and an ice axe.

In summer, the kayaking and rafting on the Colaico River is out of the very top drawer, while there’s great skiing during the winter months. Year-round attractions include mountain biking (rent your own or go on a guided tour), canopy tours (whizz across valleys while strapped to a metal cable) and numerous hot springs. Pucón is known to attract the young backpacker crowd, so it also has pretty decent nightlife.

But of course, Pucón is not the only place to get your kicks. Other bucket-list experiences include horse riding in the Atacama Desert, going on a multi-day trek through Torres del Paine and casting a fly for the jumbo trout of Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego.

For culture vultures

The majority of the population lives in the fertile Central Valley, where locals have been making art, poetry and wine for millennia. Santiago is home to some fascinating colonial architecture, art galleries and

WHERE TO STAY

- **BUDGET**
Refugio Torre Norte
This sleep offers dorm accommodation in the heart of Torres del Paine National Park. Facilities are basic, but the location more than makes up for it. fantasticosur.com
- **MODERATE**
Hotel Orly
The Santiago-based accommodation has a great central location and is housed in a cosy old mansion. hotelorly.cl
- **LUXURY**
Explora Atacama
Situated near San Pedro de Atacama, the hotel defines desert chic and has its own observatory. explora.com

PHOTOGRAPHY: NICK DALL, GALLO/GETTYIMAGES, COURTESY IMAGES

Clockwise from top left Rapa Nui or Easter Island is home to moai; enjoy the thrills in Patagonia; stay at the five-star Explora Atacama hotel in the desert; go skiing on the famous slopes of Pucón

museums, as well as a thriving food and wine scene. Chile’s best wineries are also found close to the capital, and every itinerary should include at least one day of wine tasting.

The ramshackle port town of Valparaíso, with its colourful houses and hair-raising funicular, has attracted hundreds of creative souls and it boasts an energy that’s second to none. On the other end of the spectrum, the unpretentious wooden churches on the remote archipelago of Chiloé are evocative in the extreme.

Chile is known throughout South America as ‘The Land of Poets’, but far and away the most famous of these is the Nobel Laureate Pablo Neruda. Neruda was a national hero and all three of his houses – in Santiago, Valparaíso and Isla Negra – have been turned into truly exceptional museums. His quirky architecture

and design and his obsession with all things maritime have stuck with me forever.

As if this isn’t enough, Chile has one more ace up its sleeve. Rugged and enigmatic Rapa Nui (Easter Island), located 3 500 km from the mainland, is home to the mysterious carved heads, or *moai*, which have fascinated many explorers and academics for centuries. Most visitors don’t have the time or money to include Rapa Nui in their travel plans, but those who do never forget the time they spend on the mysterious island. The cultural and ecological history of the island is definitely something you’ll want to tick off your list if you can.

Chile is so vast and so diverse that you can’t possibly experience everything it has to offer on a single holiday. Trust me: as soon as you get home, you’ll be planning your next trip. 📅