The outer limits

Anna Murphy takes off on an Andean adventure to the edge of the world, delighting in lunar landscapes, salt-crusted flats and an ancient archipelago teeming with life

Flamingos of Laguna Chaxa in the Salar de Atacama, Chile

I had expected the Atacama desert in Chile to be about the land, not the sky. It proved to be about both. On my first morning, the cirrus clouds presented variously like streamers and fireworks, and in forms that appeared almost aeronautical – not Red Arrows but white. I had never seen anything like it before: this remarkable alchemy of high altitudes and mineral dust, which together create the ice crystals that give the clouds their distinctive form.

Yet the land wasn't going to be outdone. Even before I had left my hotel – the luxury 28-room Tierra Atacama on the outskirts of the small adobe town of San Pedro de Atacama – it was making itself felt. Punctuating the Andean skyline – and visible from my terrace – was Licancabur volcano, which is 5,916 metres high and often compared with (the considerably smaller) Mount Fuji.

It was easy to understand why the local indigenous people once believed volcanoes to be deities. As I sat on my beautiful terrace, there was something about it that seemed to be alive, to be watching. It wasn't menacing, yet nor did it feel entirely benign. 'Licancabur hasn't erupted for at least 500 years,' my guide Fernando told me later. 'But it's active. If it erupts, we have, with the speed that lava travels, eight minutes to escape.' Good to know.

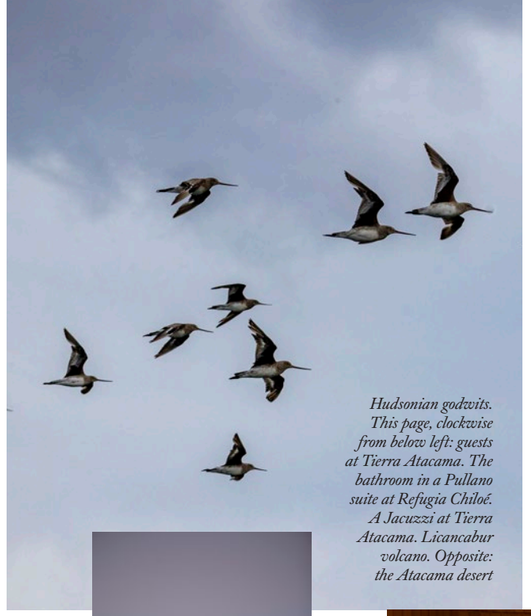
Atacama is located in the north of the long sliver of country that lies on South America's south-western coast, sandwiched between the Pacific Ocean and the Andes. It goes without saying that the desert is a place of extremes, of life on the edge, and this one is considered to be both the driest and oldest in the world. Thanks to the wide range of altitudes, it's also anything but homogenous, delivering several mises-en-scène, each as strange as the last. High season is December to February, when the days are warm and the nights not too cold, but the quieter months around it are often a better time to visit.

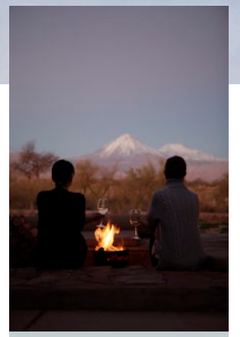
The so-called Valley of the Moon felt like another instance of the land almost breathing, the reddish sand, clay and rock rippling and swirling, rising and falling into vast edifice-like structures and deep gorges. It was an identity crisis of an environment, the horizontal planes not sure if they wouldn't, in fact, prefer to be verticals, and vice versa, and so ending up in logic-defying, impossible formations worthy of George Lucas.

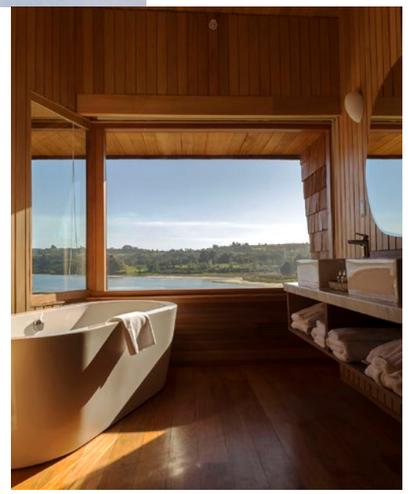
At the Salar de Atacama's salt flats, we were all alone, save for a few dozen flamingos, all of us blow-dried by the wind. The birds in the distance looked like TV aerials with feathers. Up close, they were more like sticks of candyfloss. Flamingos don't, in truth, have that much more substance to them than spun sugar. Their apparent bodily volume is an illusion created by their extravagant plumage. They weigh no more than four kilograms.

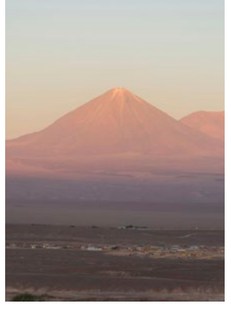
The landscape was hard to make sense of. Areas of shallow water were interspersed with a grey salt crust that, Fernando warned, would not protect me from being sucked down into the mud should I foolishly go off the path. Even if I didn't, he added, I would only last seven hours out here. What was with this guy?!

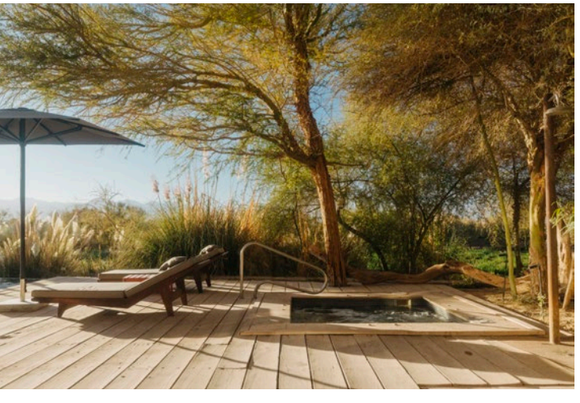
The mood lightened when, on the way back, he whipped up his signature drink out of the boot of his 4WD: a mix of Pisco – the











Hudsonian godwits. This page, clockwise from below left: guests at Tierra Atacama. The bathroom in a Pullano suite at Refugia Chiloé. A Jacuzzi at Tierra Atacama. Licancabur volcano. Opposite: the Atacama desert

spirit that Chile and Peru both claim to have created – with ginger beer and lemon. It was delicious. Did it have a name, I asked? 'No,' he replied. I told him we should christen it the 'Fernando Fernando', an echo of the repetitious local rica rica plant, which is traditionally used to guard against altitude sickness. He laughed.

The next day, we headed to the El Tatio geysers, a geothermal field that lies at 4,320 metres. The drive itself – up, up, up – was perhaps more memorable than the frothing geysers themselves. (If I were to fall in, I would have to be pulled out by my hair, still alive but not for long, Fernando cautioned.) Each altitude that we passed through delivered different plant and animal life.

You have to be tough to survive at these heights, and if there is one mammal that doesn't look as though it's up to the job, it's the supermodel-spindly vicuña, a variety of camel and now a protected species. The very expensive wool it boasts is the most costly available, estimated at about £1,000 to £2,000 a metre, and is clearly a warmth-delivering wonder-worker. You can see even from afar how soft its coat is, the golden fluff creating a subtle halo around its body.

I clocked a mere handful of adobe houses up here, only kilometres from the Bolivian border. These days, very few humans can stomach winters that drop down to –20°C, with minimal mod cons to help deal with the cold. Most people have chosen to move away. Many here work as shepherds; each dwelling had its own small sheep corral with a gate made of cactus wood. Residents also flew two flags: one being the red, white and blue of Chile that is ubiquitous throughout the country; the other being the multicoloured flag of the Andean people, which includes populations from five other countries.

Both of those flags adorned the apacheta we passed on a remote hilltop. These giant cairns were created as a spiritual offering and a navigational marker hundreds of years ago, and locals passing by will add a stone or two, or perhaps a flower (these days usually fake) or ribbon. It is also somewhere they will leave something they may need another day, Fernando explained. Sure enough, tucked away behind it was a neatly folded shepherd's blanket.

The food referenced local flavours and was outstanding. Take chañar ice-cream, which is made from the wild, date-like fruit of the same name, its taste reminiscent of fig and maple syrup. Then there were the posh nuts and dried fruit found in the hotel's reception area, to which you could help yourself whenever you were heading out on another adventure. I never want to stay anywhere that doesn't offer trail mix again.

Luckily, I was able to adhere to my newfangled tenet at my next stop. Refugia Chiloé, which until recently was part of the Tierra group, ticks many of the same boxes: stunning views and architecture; great food; and a pick 'n' mix featuring more of the very small, round and delicious Chilean hazelnuts that I came

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to love. On the island of Chiloé, you'll find them scattering the ground of the Valdivian, some of the few remaining temperate rainforests in the world.

Chiloé is, strictly speaking, an archipelago: 40 small islands, situated off the southern coast of Chile; part Tolkien's Shires, part the south coast of Cornwall, all with an edge-of-the-world otherness. The Chilean historian Renato Cárdenas once described it as being 'linked more to the sea than the continent'.

Everything is about the sea here. Small ferries zigzag between the islands, but locals still use canoes to get around, too. I even saw one man nonchalantly manoeuvring an impromptu paddleboard made out of a large square of polystyrene. In the capital of Castro, abodes are built out over the water on stilts, as if their residents can't quite bear ever to be fully on dry land. There are even graves shaped like boats.

Fields are filled with cows and sheep, but then there are those aforementioned rainforests, bursting with orange-trunked Chilean myrtle, a striking form of bamboo called quila and a chameleon vine that changes the colour of its leaves to match its host. There is also a host of idiosyncratic wildlife, such as the southern pudu, the world's smallest and (if my experience is anything to go by) shyest deer.

Even if you don't leave the hotel – which, located on top of a dramatic bluff, seems to prow its way into the surrounding waters – you will be mesmerised by nature. In the evening, the Hudsonian godwits and whimbrels – that have flown about 15,000 kilometres from Alaska – hang out by the water's edge before suddenly, extravagantly, murmurating as one, then landing again, repeating the process ad infinitum.

Chiloé's brightly coloured shingle-clad houses look like something out of a children's cartoon, even more so the manifold churches, with their pretty miniature spires and round windows. These were originally built on the orders of the Spanish invaders, although the locals didn't know how to build churches, and didn't have stone or metal either, so they constructed them as they did their boats, their roofs curved like a hull, the planks held together with intricate jigsaw joints and wooden pegs.

That one country can encompass two such diverse experiences as Chiloé and Atacama impressed me almost as much as the places themselves, and I didn't even make it to Patagonia. Why Chile isn't higher on our collective Latin American wish list, I don't know. The impossibility and inconceivability of sights that I have seen with my own eyes, real yet still unreal, make this a destination that demands a return.

A 10-day trip to Chile with Audley Travel (audleytravel.com/chile) for two, from £11,150 a person, includes international and domestic flights, transfers and accommodation (fully inclusive for three nights at Tierra Atacama and Refugia Chiloé, and two nights at a B&B in Santiago). □