



Travel

Under The Midday Sun

Even in the remotest locations on earth, luxury and adventure can still be found. Our Adventure Correspondent, Hugh Francis Anderson, travelled to the Atacama Desert, Chile, to discover more.

The midday sun projects itself over the desert with undisturbed power. My horse breathes heavily as he climbs the dunes ahead, and a light breeze sends sand spiralling into the air. "Isn't this magical?" my guide, Jucelia, asks. I glance at her with mesmerised eyes, "Indeed, it is," I reply.

I arrived into the small oasis of San Pedro de Atacama, as a guest of Explora, the luxury outdoor-focused Chilean hotel group, and made my way to their newly renovated property set within a 17-hectare plot near fringes of the town. "At Explora, our philosophy is simple," says Moraine Morrison, Explora Atacama's Hostess, "It's about the Luxury of the Essential, and about getting outside and exploring." And it truly is as simple as that. Founded in 1993 by Pedro Ibáñez, the first Explora property was built in Chilean Patagonia with the simple concept to showcase the beauty of Chile, while reconnecting with the wilderness by exploring the surrounding landscapes. This concept is gaining con-

66

"Isn't this magical?" my guide, Jucelia, asks. I glance at her with mesmerised eyes, "Indeed, it is," I reply

..... 99

siderable momentum in the world of luxury travel. Indeed, a study conducted by the Adventure Travel Trade Association last year reported a 70% increase in those seeking adventure holidays; so, it's little wonder that Explora now owns seven properties across Chile and Peru.

I sit down with Nico, one of Explora Atacama's lead Guides, to go through the exhaustive list of activities on offer. Whether on horseback, on foot or on mountain bike, there are over 40 explorations at the Atacama property to get stuck into, so I set out to discover as many as I could in my short time. For me, exploring one of the remotest deserts in the world would not be complete without doing so on horseback. So, it is with eager anticipation that I enjoy a local Pesco Sour cocktail with my Guanaco steak before heading to bed, all in the knowledge that the following morning I will be riding into the unknown.

I rise early. The morning light infiltrates my room and I smile at its splendour. Situated at 2,500m above sea-level, the Atacama Desert lies on one of the highest plateaus on the planet, and its altitude is something that takes some time to acclimatise to. Nevertheless, a brisk swim in one of the property's four pools aids the process. I make my way to meet Jucelia, the horses already saddled; we're heading for Valle de la Luna (Valley of the Moon). We ride



The La Sal Mountains

The beautiful Catarpe Valley. All pictures by © Nicholas Doll .



Riding into Valle de la Luna.



A flamingo flying at sunset over the Salar de Atacama.

out into the desert, and before long all traces of the oasis are far behind us. The landscape here is barren and void of life, yet more beautiful than I could have ever imagined. We cross the Chula sand dunes and ride up over the La Sal Mountains. Once the mountain has been traversed, we canter through deep hidden valleys that I'm told are seldom visited by locals or guests.

Upon my return, I enjoy a well-earned lunch and continue my exploration with a journey to Salar de Atacama, the famous salt flats situated in Los Flamencos National Reserve. What one comes to understand is that, although this place may seem desolate, the landscape and wildlife within them is so diverse and magnificent that one has to see it to believe it. While earlier that day I was astride a horse in the heart of the desert, I'm now on an endless salt flat, near a lagoon named Chaxa, watching the indigenous flamingos feed on the minuscule plankton that live in its waters. As the sun sets, the basin is flooded with a vibrant violet light that reflects off the volcanoes and mountain peaks of the Andes Mountains that surround us. Needless to say, I'm dumfounded by its beauty.

The following day I rise early to embark on a gentle hike up to the famous Termas de Puritama (Puritama Hot Springs). Along

the way, we traverse the ravine that follows the eponymous river, where we spot old settlements and an array of local flora and fauna, namely cacti, the rabbit-like vizcacha and many alpacas. What's mesmerising is that even in this valley, where temperatures regularly rise to above 40°C, life is boundless. Finally arriving at the hot springs, Explora's own private spring lies in waiting. What's more pleasurable than soaking in a hot spring after a long hike?

After returning to Explora for a spot of lunch on its outdoor terrace, I meet my guide, Pepe, and embark on the challenging Tambo mountain biking excursion high into the La Sal Mountains. We ride out hard and quickly enter Catarpe Valley. Here, jagged peaks of gypsum and clay rise like knives into the sky; it's almost as if I'm on Mars. We ride higher into the mountains along an ancient road, passing through a disused tunnel before ascending the final climb on foot with the bikes hung over our shoulders. Panting and exhausted, we reach the summit and look out over the valley some 500 meters below. "Now we get to have some fun," laughs Pepe, jumping on his bike. With adrenaline coursing through our veins, we career down the mountain at a rapid rate, whooping and hollering all the way. For me, it's wonderful to see how much the guides here enjoy spending

time outside on excursions with the guests. Before returning to Explora, Pepe leads me through Quebrada del Diablo (Devil's Canyon), a striking valley formed from 30-million-year-old volcanic debris; it's an awe-inspiring place to behold.

On my final evening, I make the short walk over to Explora's private observatory for a bit of star-gazing. Staring wide-eyed into the midnight sky, I'm struck by its sheer size. The sky above the Atacama Desert is one of the clearest on earth, and when the sun sets, it is liberally smattered with the glow of celestial magnificence, where planets and the Milky Way can be seen with absolute clarity.

The Atacama Desert is, without doubt, one of the most incredible destinations on Earth.

Double rooms at Explora Atacama start from \$2,019 per person based on a minimum of 3 nights. All prices include explorations, meals, drinks, transportation, access to the spa and entrance fees for all National Parks.

For more information visit www.explora.com

66

The Atacama desert is, without doubt, one of the most incredible destinations on Earth.

..... 99

Puritama Hot Springs.

