EchoTravel

5 pages of fantastic destinations

Snow-capped peaks, smouldering volcanoes and roads that go on forever, Ruth Addicott explores Chile and the wild beauty of Patagonia



Chile is a country of dramatic and spectacular scenery

An epic adventure in Chile



The terrace at The Aubrey Picture: JAMES FLORIO

FLYING over the Andes en route to Santiago sends a shiver down your spine. It's not just the landscape and scenery that makes Chile unique (where else can you find volcanoes, vineyards, glaciers and desert?), but its size. It is 4,300 km in length – the equivalent of Norway to Nigeria – stretching from the Atacama Desert, known as the driest place on Earth, to the dramatic ice-fields, fjords and Ice Age glaciers of Patagonia in the south.

With only three weeks to see as much as we can, our epic adventure begins in Santiago. Situated at the foot of the Andes, surrounded by snow-capped peaks, few cities boast a backdrop like this. With leafy streets, innovative restaurants, art galleries, book shops and pavement cafes, it's friendly, safe and easy to get around using a modern metro (60p per journey). The city boasts the tallest skyscraper in South America.

What sets Santiago apart is the raw memory of the Pinochet regime, which saw thousands of innocent people killed. There are reminders everywhere, from the brightly-coloured murals to the poetry and songs of freedom that ring out from the suburbs (or "barrios") into the night. The Museo de la Memoria y los Derechos Humanos is a must-see, featuring TV footage, photographs, art and powerful eye witness accounts of the military coup and its impact on the country.

Also worth a visit is La Chascona, the former home of poet Pablo Neruda. He named it La Chascona ("tangled-haired woman") as a tribute to his wife and it's a fascinating insight into his life. Nearby is the hill of Cerro San Cristobal, which has a 22m-high statue of the Virgin Mary and panoramic views over the city.

So where to stay? Santiago has everything from five-star boutique hotels to good-quality hostels. Rio Amazonas (*hostalrioamazonas.cl*) is ideal if you're on a budget. Each room has a private bathroom and breakfast is served in a pretty courtyard with fresh fruit, bread and delicious homemade jam.

The bohemian barrio of Bellavista, meanwhile, is home to the city's first boutique hotel, The Aubrey (*theaubrey.com*). Built in a restored 1927 mansion, the hotel has 15 rooms and oozes class, with dark wood, copper lamps, polished parquet floors and huge comfy feather beds. Guests can enjoy complimentary afternoon tea, cocktails in the piano lounge, a fine restaurant and an outdoor terrace with cascading waterfalls and swimming pool.

Also stylish is the newly-opened boutique hotel, Luciano K (*lucianokhotel.com*), in the fashionable district of Lastarria. Designed by architect Luciano Kulczewski in the 1920s, it was once the tallest building in the city and the first to have central heating and a lift (which is still in working order). The highlight is the rooftop bar and terrace, with amazing canapes, cocktails and views. The hotel has 38 rooms and retains its original features with marble staircases and beautiful tiled floors.

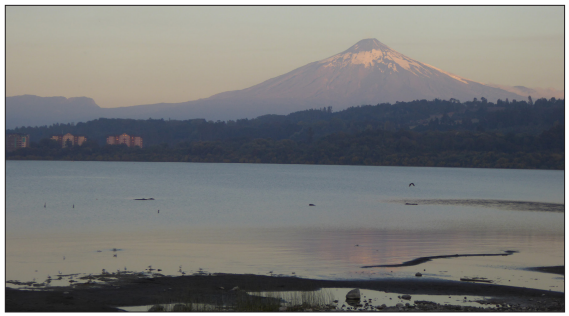
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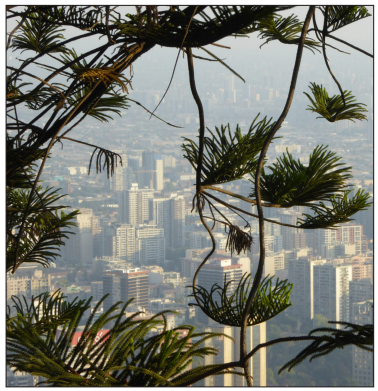
"When you leave Patagonia, you take a piece of Patagonia in your heart"

It's midnight, torrential rain and we've booked the overnight bus to Villarrica. We're heading 500 miles south to the Lake District, known for skiing, hiking and watersports. It's a nine-hour journey and costs £20 (we booked a "cama" – a seat that goes back with legroom). With ear plugs to drown out the sound of snoring, I drift off to sleep and am woken eight hours later with a cardboard breakfast box containing two strawberry wafers and a carton of juice, which goes down surprisingly well.

Dawn is breaking as we arrive in Villarrica and we pull up beside an enormous blue lake with Volcan Villarrica towering above it. One of Chile's most active volcanoes, it shot lava 3,000ft into the sky in 2015 and is an impressive sight. You need a hard hat, ice axe and crampons to climb to the top, so we head for the hot thermal springs, explore the lakes (including the Mount Fuji-like Volcan Osorno) and go white-water rafting.

Next, we board a bus to Puerto Montt and ferry to South America's second-largest island, the archipelago of Chiloe. We're staying in Castro, famous for its "palafitos" – brightly-coloured fishermen's houses on stilts. The town was devastated by an earthquake and tidal wave in 1960, but the palafitos survived and have been restored into cafes and boutique apartments (*palafitodelmar.cl*).







Volcan Villarrica, one of Chile's most active volcanoes. Right, top, the city of Santiago, situated at the foot of the Andes. Below, some palafitos – brightly-coloured fishermen's houses on stilts Pictures: SIAN ADDICOTT

There are no backpackers (except us) as it's out of season. The sky is blue and the water so serene, it has to be one of the most peaceful places on earth. Chiloe is a haven of tranquility, with dense forests, national parks and wildlife – in season you can see penguins and sea otters and hire a kayak at dawn.

After picking up some Mapuche crafts from the market, we try the local dish, "Curanto" (a concoction of shellfish, smoked pork, chicken, sausage and purple potato dumplings topped with two giant rhubarb leaves cooked in a pit in the ground). Not for the faint-hearted – but there's freshly-cooked trout if you prefer. We are sad to leave, but have to catch a flight to our final destination – Patagonia. Nothing prepares you for the size, remoteness and beauty of this place. It is a land of complete wilderness, huge skies, wind-battered steppe and one bus a week.

Standing at the stop clutching a Post-it note with "Tres Chicas" scribbled on it (our ticket), the only sign of life is a man in a poncho on horseback with three pigs trailing behind him. Eventually, the bus arrives (it's packed) and we're on the bumpiest six-hour bus ride of our lives. The reward is the spectacular scenery – we are on the Carretera Austral, one of the most breathtaking drives in the world. As we chug past emerald lakes, soaring peaks, the occasional glimpse of a huemul (south Andean deer) and waterfalls cascading down mountains, it is hard to top this – and we haven't seen Torres Del Paine yet. All too soon our trip comes to an end and we're leaving this incredible, amazing, mystical place behind.

When you leave Patagonia, you take a piece of Patagonia in your heart – it's like an ache that keeps drawing you back.

TRAVEL FACTS

- **Flights from Durham Tees to Santiago via Amsterdam from £599 with KLM, *klm.com***

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