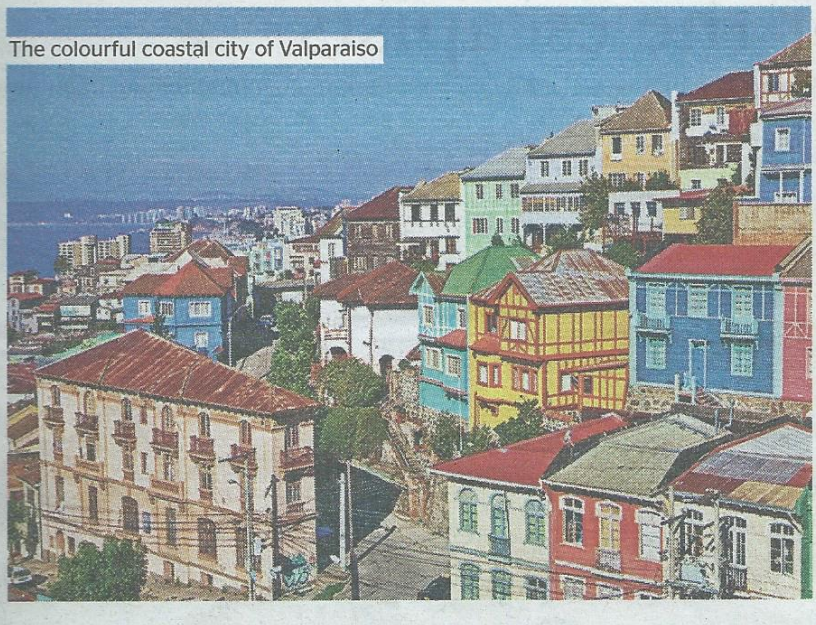


ng vicuñas and the
y Andes mountains



The colourful coastal city of Valparaiso

eat avocado sandwiches and talk about the latest earthquake (Chile gets lots of earthquakes, which means very few buildings make it to their 100th birthday).

Viña del Mar, 30 minutes up the coast, is entirely different. This is swish Chile, a city in which you can sense the surging prosperity of South America's first truly developed nation. Chic women stare at sea lions on the rocks, rich kids drive around in Ferraris, llama chops are seared to not quite perfection (they're a bit tough, but the taste is scrumptious, like seasoned lamb).

Don't, however, expect to do any swimming at those inviting beaches; thanks to the Antarctic current that skirts these shores, the sea is cold year-round. If you want to swim comfortably in Chile, you've got to go to the far north, and Iquique.

This, indeed, is my next dilemma. North or south? I'd like to head down to fabled Patagonia, with its glacier lakes and savage fjords, but it's the wrong season and I might get hypothermia. Instead I shall fly up to the Atacama, the driest and highest desert on Earth.

First impressions are not brilliant. As Carlos, my guide, speeds us out of Calama airport, all I can see is the fudge-brown pollution haze from the world's biggest copper mine, Chuquicamata. Eventually that dwindles into the distance and the Atacaman deathscapes take over, where ochre and russet volcanoes slope to sculpted valleys of sandstone, and blinding white salt flats. Vicuñas (a relative of the llama) flee the solitary noise of the car, flamingos feed in the saline lakes. Near here is the eerie ghost town of Yungay, where it looks as if it hasn't rained for 200,000 years (actually it rains about once a decade). Even microbes can't survive.

Luckily, I'm staying somewhere rather livelier: San Pedro de Atacama, a faintly Wild West oasis of colonial churches, pretty backpackers, native craft markets, adobe youth hostels, Chilean cowboys and trendy cocktail bars shaded by pepper trees.

In recent years cute and fashionable San Pedro has been adopted by luxury hotel chains and high-end holiday operators.

absolutely nothing, for maybe a week. Or three. It has been a whistlestop tour. But Carlos has other plans.

"We're going to the Valley of Death."

"Excellent news."

"The sunsets are amazing."

He's not wrong. I've seen a few epic sunsets, but this is special. We hike down a lunar valley of naked stone. A warm breeze shaves the sand dunes, making whispers of whirring gold. As we climb to the top of one dune, the dying sun turns the Andes into an immense and amethystine curtain of glowing rock.

Carlos points at one of these purpled peaks. "Tomorrow we climb there — 18,400ft."

And so, here I am. This is where we came in. I've taken the Viagra, I've donned my layers, but where are the Sherpas? And what about crampons? Or oxygen? Nothing.

In brooding silence we drive to 16,000ft, my heart thumping like a Burundi drum. Clambering out — already panting — we begin the slow ascent, drinking water every ten metres, slapping on more sunblock every six metres. Eventually we are stopping every three metres, so I can have a five-minute break. The walk isn't steep, but the lack of oxygen is punishing, borderline painful.

And then, as my headache threatens to turn into a migraine, I take the last agonising step and I reach the top.

This is it. I'm standing on the sunburnt summit of El Toco, which is taller than Mont Blanc, the highest peak in the Alps. I'm gazing at a Wagnerian parade of ice-scarfed mountains that guard the burning heart of a strange yet stirring desert that, in places, has less life than anywhere else on Earth.

I feel like a 90-year-old with sciatica. I also feel a kind of wistful ecstasy. And it isn't anything to do with Viagra.

Need to know

Cool places to stay in Chile

Explora Hotel, Atacama
When this gorgeous property reopens just before Christmas after major renovation, expect sumptuous rooms with huge windows, whitewashed walls and wicker furniture. What you won't find are TVs or wi-fi: this is a place to disconnect from the world. Spend your days exploring on horseback, and the evenings gawping at stars from the hotel's observatory.
Details Three nights' full board (the minimum stay) is from £1,870pp, including local activities and airport transfers (020 3051 8098, theultimatetravelcompany.co.uk)

Luciano K, Santiago
Santiago is cool and cosmopolitan with great museums and restaurants. The boutique art deco hotel Luciano K opened in the spring in a property built in the 1920s. The large roof terrace has a swimming lane and there's a chic bar.
Details A night's B&B is from £130 (01296 653000, lastfrontiers.com)

Remota, Puerto Natales
With floor-to-ceiling windows and minimalist design, this intriguing hotel, just outside the small town of Puerto Natales, is quite a find. The rooms are



cosy but basic, and have sweeping views of the surrounding lake, mountains and ice fields. It may not be for purists, but with stunning scenery and local staff, it's got a lot going for it.
Details Doubles are from £167, room only (01179 467072, i-escape.com)

Hotel Antumalal, Pucon
Built in the 1940s with Bauhaus-inspired architecture, this quirky hotel flanks the southern edge of Lake Villarrica, with great views down to the water. Each of the 23 rooms has its own fireplace, and sheepskin rugs and throws woven by locals. This month a new Lake House, *above*, opens on the shore. Sleeping six, it has a king-room with en suite, two twins and a spacious kitchen.
Details One night's half-board is from £303pp (01173 690196, swoop-patagonia.com)