



Atacama Desert Extension

The most arid region in the world. The Atacama Desert offers breathtaking scenery, some of the tallest volcanoes on earth, spectacular wildlife sightings, visits to expansive salt flats and colourful hot springs, dramatic geysers and fascinating archaeological sites, all of which combine to make a visit to this area unmissable and certainly unforgettable.

Geology - it is often said that the Atacama Desert is 'the most arid in the world'. In fact, in some parts it has never rained and in others the percentage of humidity is nil, but its wealth is based on mining. The desert's aridity is explained by global and local climate aspects, as well as geography and oceanography factors, the high mountains in the Andes and the flowing of the Humboldt current. The result is large zones where literally nothing is seen but mountain reliefs and different colours according to the position of the sun and the type of geological formation. The geology of the Atacama Desert is a feast for the eye with volcanic and erosive forces combining to create a truly otherworldly landscape. A row of volcanoes dominates the eastern skyline indicating the proximity of the Altiplano, with its immense salt flats, multi-coloured lakes and hot springs. In the extreme aridity of the desert, mineral deposits create a kaleidoscope of wind-eroded hills and rock formations such as those in the Valle de la Luna (Moon Valley). The region's high volcanic activity comes to the surface in spectacular geysers, steam vents (fumaroles) and hot springs. In a canyon high above San Pedro de Atacama, the natural pools of Banos de Puritama, make for the Atacama's most spectacular stargazing.

Archaeology - together with the beauty of the landscape, the Chilean desert holds enormous archaeological riches. Vestiges of ancient indigenous cultures such as the Aymara can be seen. Also, Chile's foremost archaeological museum, the Padre Le Paige Museum in San Pedro de Atacama, contains over 380,000 artifacts. The entire region boasts an astonishing concentration of rock art, including paintings, petroglyphs and enormous geoglyphs and the world's largest human figure ever drawn. The volcanoes that crown the Atacama Desert are among the tallest on earth and their summits used to be sacred sanctuaries for the ancient Incas. For those interested in more recent manifestations, the Atacama also preserves dozens of eerie ghost towns dating from the turn of the century's nitrate boom.

Culture - due to its important location at a crossroads of ancient trading routes, the San Pedro de Atacama oasis have long been influenced by neighbouring cultures, especially the great empires of the central Andes (Tiwanaqu and the Incas). Today the Atacameno Indians live in agricultural sectors known as ayllos, each one linked to a specific kinship group. The smaller villages around the Salar de Atacama salt flat, such as Tocaño, Peine and Socaire, are even more traditional, living from irrigated agriculture and herds of domesticated llamas and alpacas.

Wildlife - although the Atacama desert is so dramatic that it appears never to have sustained any life, pink flamingos, llamas, vicunas, vizcachas and guanacos live together here in perfect sustainable harmony in the many oases and lakes located in the area.



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Accommodation – you will stay at the delightful Hotel Terrantai which is made of Adobe and built in the traditional Atacamenos (Indian) style with brown bricks. The hotel fits in superbly with the region and is run by very friendly Atacamenos.

ITINERARY

Day 1 Arrive at Calama's airport and transfer to San Pedro de Atacama (98km) crossing the Cordillera de la Sal with amazing rock formations. Relax over lunch and receive a trip briefing in San Pedro de Atacama. The evening schedules an interesting Ethnic tour which introduces the social & economic system developed for the ancient inhabitants to work and live in harmony on this remote oasis. It is possible to learn about some of the land working techniques, which manage to produce food with little water in extreme weather conditions. The tour ends at the archaeological remains of Tulo, a sacred village with singular rounded constructions whose origin and decay remains a mystery.

Hotel, San Pedro de Atacama L

Day 2 Today's exploration starts by visiting the small village of Toconao, 35km from San Pedro, well known for its volcanic rock handcrafts. Walk in the nearby valley of Jeria and observe the typical cultivation on terraces. On the way back enter the immense and sparkling white Atacama Saltflat until you reach the beautiful Chaxa lagoon where flamingoes and other Andean birds nest. Be back at San Pedro on time for lunch. Afterwards, visit the Museo Arqueologico to gain an insight into the ancient cultures that inhabited the area. Next, visit and walk around the remarkable remains of the fortress of Quitor, 3 km from San Pedro. Its strategic location overlooking the neighbouring fertile valleys gave peace and splendour to its original inhabitants, the Atacamenos (XII century) until first the Incas and later the Spanish conquerors (XVI century) invaded the city. As the sun goes down enter the silent Moon Valley and explore its extraordinary rock formations. **Hotel, San Pedro de Atacama B, L**

Day 3 Leave the Hotel at 04:30 hrs in time to observe the incredible geysers in action at El Tatio (4,500m). This is a 270km round trip. The boiling steam rises up to 40m over the surface and some 900m from underground. Watching the sun rise in the background to these spectacular displays, gradually warming the frozen ground and casting a strange light on the many coloured hues is a memory you will never forget. Enjoy breakfast in the open and walk around the geothermal field. Drive back along dirt Andean roads with magnificent views of the Tocopurri and Sairecahur volcanoes. The evening is free to walk around the town and visit the picturesque church, square and handcraft market. **Hotel, San Pedro de Atacama B, L**

Day 4 After breakfast drive about 135 km south east of San Pedro to reach Pakana's Sentinels. Pakana is a group of rocky structures in columns that have remained since geological times, the result of volcanic eruptions which took place during the tertiary era. A wonderful landscape with the extraordinary ecosystem of the tara salt flat at 4500m. Enjoy lunch on the way while returning to Calama in time to catch the evening flight to Santiago. **B,**

From £595 per person (2 pax minimum) based on sharing a twin room (departs every Tuesday). Please note that various dates can you join small group for single travellers, please ask the office for specific prices.



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Includes: flights (if bought in conjunction with main 'Chilean Explorer' trip using Lanchile flights internationally) accommodation, meals in the Atacama Desert as per the above itinerary (breakfasts, and picnic lunches), transfers, guided tours, park entrance fees

Excludes: tips, souvenirs, personal spending, other meals etc...



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