



TORRES DEL PAINE NATIONAL PARK

Travels in a Thin Country

Jenny Geal, Audley's newly appointed Chile specialist, recently revisited her favourite country.

Between Chile's best-known and most startlingly diverse regions; the desert in the north and Patagonia in the south, lie a range of landscapes, attractions and activities that will surprise some and appeal to most. The Atacama's claim to be the driest place on earth has made it famous, the photogenic granite towers of the famous "Torres del Paine" National Park have graced the cover of many a travel magazine, and the stunning beauty of the Lake District is much fabled, but Chile's less publicised delights are equally worth investigating.

Although I managed to cover a lot of ground in the month I spent travelling the 'thin country' on my Audley research trip, four weeks is barely enough to scratch the surface of Chile. I was, however, lucky enough to experience a huge amount and I loved every minute of it! Chileans are enormously friendly people and their country is a

stable and prosperous one, superbly equipped to welcome tourists.

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From Santiago I followed the road south through the increasingly green and lush countryside to the Colchagua Valley, where I spent two days visiting wineries and sampling their produce. Chile's wines are increasingly popular on the international market, and, encouraged by having a father in the wine trade, I was particularly keen to do some rigorous research into the 'big



BELLAVISTA, SANTIAGO

Chilean reds'. The vineyards are immaculate, stretching away as far as the eye can see towards the country's ever-present Andean spine, and the

wineries vary from traditional white-washed farmhouses to gleaming modern enterprises. A hearty steak (accompanied, naturally, by a large glass of wine) eaten in the shade of the vines made for a memorable lunch, and the richly decorated and sumptuously comfortable Hotel Santa Cruz Plaza ensured that my overnight stay in the wine region was similarly indulgent.

Continuing a theme, I moved from wine to pisco, the national drink of both Chile and Peru; a fiercely fortified muscatel distillation that can be up to 50% proof and is delicious when mixed with lime, sugar and ice to create the ubiquitous 'pisco sour'. Starting out from La Serena; the second oldest city in Chile, and a charming mixture of seafront vistas, shady plazas and colonial buildings, I travelled into the Elqui Valley, along a winding road dotted with vineyards and impossibly picturesque villages, devoid of tourists but brimming with character.



HOTEL SANTA CRUZ PLAZA

I fell in love with pretty Pisco Elqui, perched on a hillside and home to only six hundred residents, and equally enjoyed tiny Monte Grande, where the immaculately preserved wooden schoolhouse in which Gabriela Mistral and her family lived and taught provides a wonderful insight into a much simpler way of life. Mistral was the first Latin American to be awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature and the haunting beauty and solitude of the area in which she wrote features often in her poetry. Back towards La Serena again, a small town named Vicuna is also fascinating for those interested in astronomy, for it is said to have the clearest skies in the southern hemisphere and houses an excellent observatory through whose

telescope I counted craters on the moon's surface.



ELQUI VALLEY

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Moving on to the northern tip of Patagonia, I found myself gazing up at the stars again, but this time from the hot springs of the Termas de Puyuhuapi hotel, accessible only by boat via a stunning five hour journey through a maze of fjords. Tranquil and secluded, this very special place is home only to a luxury hotel and acres of virgin forest, rich with the smell of pine and the sound of birdsong. You cannot help but relax here, be it while luxuriating in the warm volcanic waters of the outdoor rock pools or during a thalassotherapy (seaweed) massage in the spa, and thanks to the peace and quiet, the fresh air and the mineral-rich waters, I came away feeling thoroughly pampered and entirely refreshed after my hard week of wine and pisco tasting.

Back in Santiago again, I spent time in the colourful and bohemian Bellavista district, from which I took a cable car up the Cerro San Cristobal to the statue of the Virgin Mary and admired the city spread out below me. At the foot of the hill, my guide also took me to visit La Chascona, one of three houses previously owned by Chile's other famous Nobel prize winner, Pablo Neruda, now converted into fascinating museums. Finding time to fit in a little shopping before boarding the plane home, I bought hand-crafted



jewellery made from the vivid blue semi-precious lapis lazuli stone, found only in Chile and Afghanistan, and reluctantly headed for the airport with the determination that I would be back again soon.

Legend has it that when God created the world, he had a handful of everything left – mountains, deserts, lakes and glaciers – and he put it all in his pocket. But there was a hole in this pocket, and as God walked across heaven, it all trickled out, and the long trail it made on earth was Chile. Fanciful though the notion is, I like this description of a varied and captivating country with something to offer everyone.

Travel File

A 14-night tailor-made tour of Chile including the sights mentioned in the article costs from £2,495 per person based on two people travelling. For information on all aspects of travel to Chile please call Jenny on 01869 276 244.