

# DRIVE CHILE

*Chile's ever improving road network makes a self-drive tour of its astonishing landscapes a real pleasure.*

*Nick Giles hits the Pan-American Highway.*

**T**he Andes form an imposing backdrop as you fly in to Santiago. The Chilean capital is a safe, tree-lined city, with a remarkably friendly atmosphere and is well worth a couple of days' exploration before you set off on your journey.

Not long after taking delivery of the hire car at my hotel I was heading down the Pan-American Highway, driving south in the morning sunshine towards the Lake District where I hoped to arrive in a week or so. My first stop was the leafy town of Santa Cruz in the beautiful Colchagua Valley, with enough vineyards to satisfy the most avid wine buff. You might like to stay at the Santa Cruz Plaza, a lovely hotel in the centre of town which has its own museum. Wine tours run regularly from there and the restaurants serve some of the best Chilean food I have ever tasted.

The next day I continued along the Pan-American on a magnificent drive to Termas de Chillan, a spa town at the foot of Chillan volcano. The journey to Gran Hotel Termas de Chillan takes you deep into a mountainous landscape perfect for outdoor pursuits (including skiing in the winter) but it was the thermal pools that drew me here. The setting is idyllic, with verdant mountainsides and rocky peaks backed by clear blue skies. The sense of relaxation can be heightened by indulging in a hot pebble massage!

It takes an effort to leave such tranquility, but more temptations await four hours south towards Villarica Lake and Pucon. Here, there are endless opportunities for exploring the easily accessible national parks, lakes, rivers and abundance of hot springs. The Villarica Park Lake Hotel, set by the water's edge, has first class spa facilities and food, and after two days of adventure in the national parks, fishing on the local rivers, and swimming in thermal pools I felt I could have stayed here forever. Certainly, a further night would have been ideal, but I don't think my manager would have been too impressed.

Another mountain-framed journey south took me to my next destination. Skirting Puyehue Lake, I drove into the national park for a stay at Termas de Puyehue. With the snowy caps of Puyehue volcano on one horizon and the great pan of lake water stretching to the other, this retreat's thermal pools are a dramatic place for relaxation.

My final destination was Puerto Varas. This pretty town nestling on the edge of Lake Llanquihue is, like many places in this volcanic land, blessed with hot springs, as well as forests, lakes and rivers. Nearby is the scenic Vicente Perez National Park and the striking blue waters of Lake Todos Los Santos. The presence of the Osorno and Calbuco volcanoes is huge, towering over a town well known for fragrant roses that bloom between December and March. There are a handful of well run hotels with spectacular views over the lake to the volcanoes, and though not luxurious they are friendly, clean, comfortable and ideally located for sipping a pisco sour after exploring the lakes, islands, mountains and small German settlements of Frutillar and Puerto Octay.

Returning my hire car to Puerto Montt airport marked the end of my adventure. Flying on to Santiago and back to the UK gave me time to reflect on the landscape I had experienced in the previous 11 days. The freedom of driving and exploring some of the most beautiful parts of Chile was a journey that made me realise exactly why I love this remarkable part of the world.

**Nick Giles**  
Chile Specialist

## WEB PLUS

[www.audleytravel.com/drivechile](http://www.audleytravel.com/drivechile)

Further driving itineraries in Chile, plus tips on driving abroad.



Santa Cruz Hotel

## FACT FILE

A 12 night self-drive itinerary costs from £2,200 per person based on two people travelling. LAN, Iberia and British Airways all fly to Santiago from London Heathrow. For further details please call Nick, Phil, Susan or Vicky on 01869 276 210.





Osorno Volcano and Petrohue Falls



Local Chilean woman, Puerto Varas



Vineyards, Colchagua Valley