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# BLACKBOOK

A GUIDE FOR THE SOPHISTICATED TRAVELER HERE & ABROAD

EDITED BY ANDREW SESSA



Midday at the oasis:  
Tierra Atacama's pool

Off the Beaten Path

## Chile's New Rugged Chic

On a stay in South America's Atacama Desert, **BEN CRAMER** goes looking for adventure.

**M**y lips are chapped. My skin roasted red. There's no water. The air is thin. Chile's Atacama Desert, among the driest in the world, barely sustains animal life. And now, as my small group of city-slick horseback adventurers makes its way up a steep, sandy slope with no civilization in sight, it occurs to me that my own life is only being sustained by the expertise of our guide, George. Just then, however, he announces that we have entered the area known as the *Valle de la Muerte*, the Valley of Death.

The Atacama is an unlikely playground. And yet with its true year-round adventure offerings and some of the most austere and stunning natural beauty in the world, this region in the extreme north of Chile is increasingly attracting North Americans and Europeans. As emerging high-end destinations go, the Atacama is in the sweet spot: Only recently embraced by luxe travel firms—Absolute Travel, Abercrombie & Kent, and Geographic Expeditions all book trips here—it's still years away from becoming overrun. "We recommend it to clients looking for adventure and to explore nature," says Pedro Barraza, A&K's managing director

for Chile. In the past five years his company has doubled its client visits to the area.

Here, intrepid spirits can play as intensely as they like: horseback riding in the Moon Valley of the Salt mountain range, trekking to geysers, biking through gorges, summiting volcanoes, walking to Laguna Chaxa, where pink flamingos somehow eke out a living. Bespoke travel planner Lisa Lindblad sent Jennie Emil, a New York restaurateur who was a co-owner of Windows on the World, to the area. "I did some of the coolest things I've ever done in my life," says Emil. "Spectacular hiking, skiing down giant sand ridges in my shoes. I've traveled extensively, and I've never seen deserts like that."

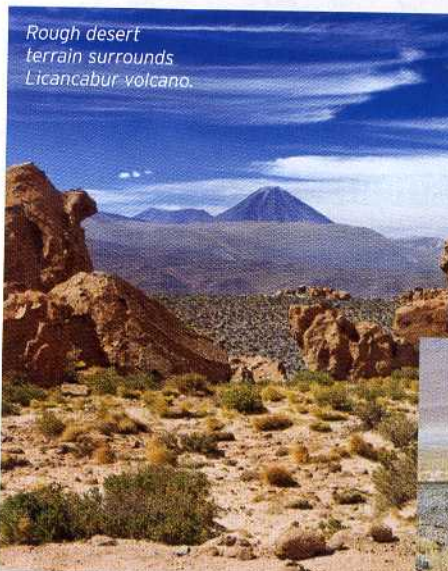
This remote region around the tiny town of San Pedro de Atacama (population 2,500), a two-hour flight followed by an hour's drive north of Santiago, had been a destination that only the hardiest, comfort-be-damned backpackers once reached. But now, rather suddenly, San Pedro is offering serious luxury. In addition to the Explora property here—an Atacama pioneer and the only deluxe offering in town for nearly a decade—several hotels have launched in the last two and a half years, including Tierra Atacama, which opened in 2008, and the tiny boutique Awasi, which landed in 2006. Today the Atacama is an off-the-beaten-path adventure destination, one ideal for those who like a spa treatment or a good glass of wine at day's end.

Ultimately, though, people come for the great outdoors, so the hotels' inclusive rates cover expeditions. And all the properties hit the same sites. The major difference is that Explora and Tierra Atacama tackle excursions in small groups on a set schedule, while Awasi lets guests set their own agendas. The first option is right for visitors who believe that the best way to get to know a new place is with new friends, and the latter for those who want a more private experience.

**EXPLORA**

**PEDRO IBANEZ**, owner of Explora (which also operates in Patagonia and Easter Island), got to know the Atacama intimately before he built a luxury hotel in the middle of the desert. Plenty of locals and travel pros thought he was nuts, but, says Ibáñez, "It wasn't a gamble. Something here compels you to come back. It's so remote, it gives you the perspective to disconnect with your everyday life and connect with yourself."

**CONTINUED »**



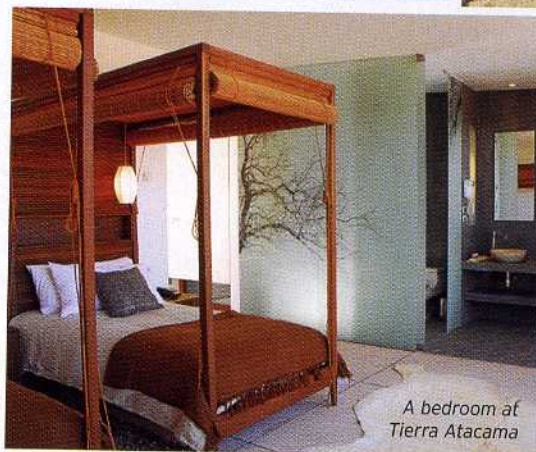
*Rough desert terrain surrounds Licancabur volcano.*



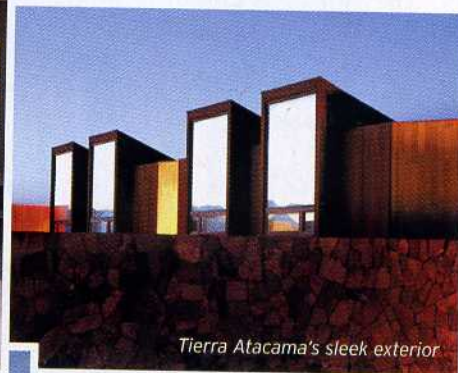
*Explora's newly redone pool*



*Awasi's Jeeps take guests on private excursions.*



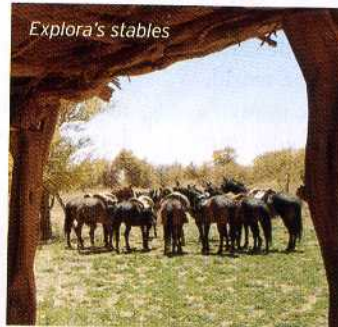
*A bedroom at Tierra Atacama*



*Tierra Atacama's sleek exterior.*



*Lunch during an Explora outing*



*Explora's stables*



*Thatched-roof dining rooms and the courtyard pool at Awasi*



Off-roading on the salt-flat shores of Atacama's Laguna Verde

Explora's gospel has always been that people come to the Atacama not to spend time in a hotel but to get out into nature. Nonetheless, with the pressure of new competition, the hotel has responded with \$7 million in improvements, including the renovation of common spaces and dining rooms, the addition of four suites to its 50 rooms, and a redone swimming area with four large pools of varying water temperatures.

Explora distinguishes itself with the region's longest track record of leading visitors into the desert's nooks and crannies, and it keeps its staff of 19 multilingual, college-educated guides trained in emergency response. It's also the only hotel here to have its own stable of horses plus a serious celestial observatory. (The Atacama's nearly 8,000-foot altitude and almost complete lack of precipitation and light pollution give it some of the clearest skies on earth.)

Emil, the New York restaurateur, traveled solo to Chile and so particularly enjoyed the property's set schedule of small-group excursions. "Explora was perfect," she says. "We ate together and hiked together. You could be alone or not as you liked."

## TIERRA ATACAMA

**WHILE NO LESS** adventure-game than Explora, both this hotel and Awasi make staying in for the day a very appealing option, too. Opened last year by the owners

of Chile's Portillo ski resort, the 32-room property has a modern design—angular and crisp with dark wood and stone—but it remains a soothing sanctuary. From the mazelike entryway to the weighty front door to the communal area's roaring fire (as close to a cool nightlife vibe as you'll find here), Tierra Atacama sets a hipper and cozier tone than Explora.

The spa, Uma, lures explorers back from the sun and sand with its pools, steam room, body treatments, herbal teas, and cucumber water, and the standard rooms are bright and airy, if sparsely furnished, with animal-skin throw rugs and simple couches. (The hotel has two three-bedroom Family Suites as well.) All rooms have well-apportioned modern bathrooms, outdoor showers, and small patios perfect for relaxing with a book until the stars begin to come out in the darkening sky.

## AWASI

**THIS EIGHT-ROOM** boutique spot differentiates itself by emphasizing privacy and a fully customizable experience. And that, says managing director Barraza, makes it A&K's first choice for booking clients, who appreciate exceedingly personalized service. Each room has its own dedicated guide, driver, and Jeep to help guests schedule and realize the classic Atacama experiences—biking to the salty, turquoise Laguna Sejas, say, or attempting to

summit the 19,423-foot Licancabur volcano. The rooms also prioritize seclusion. The softly lit, spacious cottages—round adobe, stone, and wood structures modeled after the homes of Chile's ancient Tulo civilization—open onto their own quiet patios.

The outdoor common area plays to the Atacama's environmental strengths—no rain, year-round mild temperatures. Thatched-roof and partially open-air lounge, library, kitchen, and dining areas surround a courtyard with a pool and a fire pit. And the small number of rooms means that even at full capacity the hotel doesn't seem crowded. When the chef serves dinner—a tender fillet in red wine sauce with local vegetables, perhaps, and an appetizer of shrimp in a mango and *merquen* coulis—it's as if he has made it just for you.

Which sounds absolutely wonderful right about now, as we trot out of the wilderness in dwindling daylight. With my first glimpse in hours of the edge of little San Pedro, it looks as if I've escaped the grasp of the Valley of Death. This time.

*Rates at Explora range from \$1,920 per person for three nights to \$10,520 for eight nights (866-750-6699; explora.com). At Tierra Atacama they go from \$840 for two nights to \$3,190 for seven nights (800-829-5325; tierraatacama.com). And at Awasi, \$1,280 for two nights to \$3,375 for five nights (888-880-3219; awasi.com).*