THE AUSTRALIAN
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REASONS TO BOOT SCOOT OVER TO CALGARY

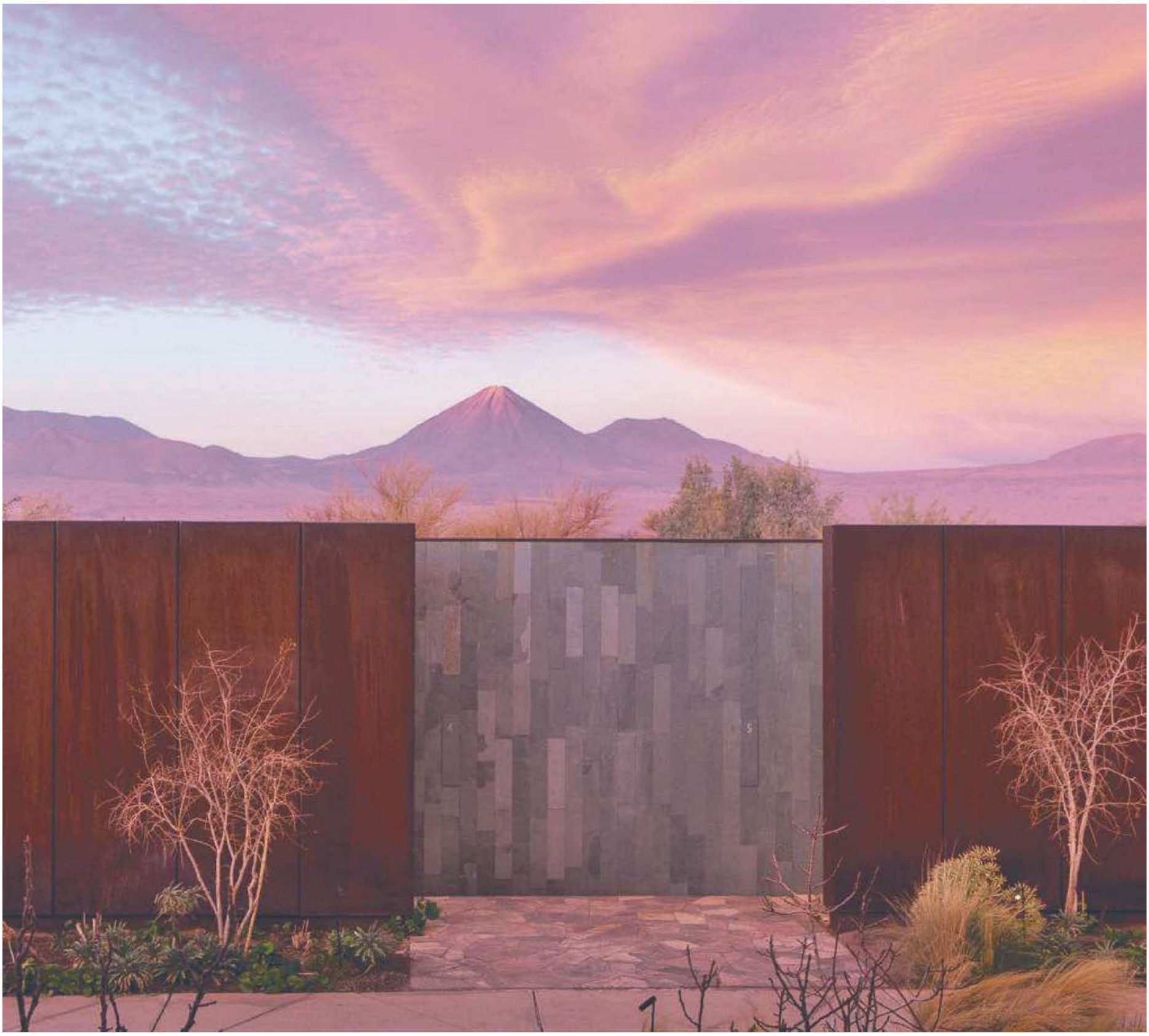
ANOTHER PLANET

The otherworldly beauty of Chile's Atacama Desert

WOW FACTOR
London's Savoy hotel unveils a new look

SAFARI SURPRISE
The African country that flies under the radar





HIGH AND DRY

Experience the vast emptiness of Chile's Atacama Desert from the refined sanctuary of a revamped lodge

MARK JOHANSON

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Licancabur volcano from Tierra Atacama, left; pool deck and guestrooms at the Baillie Lodges property

'What's the first image that comes to mind when you think about nature," asks Aurora Radich, a nature therapist in northern Chile. "It's a forest, right?" I'm sitting in front of Radich on a colourful Andean cushion, eyes closed, engrossed in a session of shinrin-yoku, or forest bathing. And yet, the closest true forest is hundreds of kilometres away. Instead, we're in an old alfalfa field in San Pedro de Atacama, an oasis of prickly shrubs and miraculous gardens in the otherwise peanut-brown wilds of the Atacama, which is the world's driest non-polar desert.

Radich guides me over the span of two hours with a series of prompts. The first has me lying on the ground, tracing the spindly branches of an algarrobo tree against the cloudless sky. I later tune in to various frequencies on the aural horizon: there's the rustle of wind through foxtails; the clip-clop of a passing horse; the buzz of antagonistic flies. I pat the rough, pistachio-coloured bark of a chanar, and make a small mountain out of its marble-sized fruits. I nibble on bitter alfalfa flowers as the setting sun casts a spotlight on distant volcanoes. I try to feel the Atacama Desert with all five senses and, in doing so, reset my mind to the current geography.

"Many visitors feel uncomfortable with the vastness of this desert, and they need to do something with that feeling," Radich explains as we drink a herbal tea together afterwards. We pour a few drops on the ground to share with Pachamama, or Mother Earth, as is the local custom. "In truth, there's something really important about this emptiness," she adds. "If you take the time to look closely, you find that it's really full of life."

This is something I discovered previously on a four-month journey through the Atacama to research my book, Mars on Earth: Wanderings in the World's Driest Desert. Now I'm on my first trip back to the region since the book was released in January, and I plan to explore with fresh eyes. My home base this time is the all-inclusive adventure lodge Tierra Atacama, which reopened in April following a year-long $31m gut renovation spearheaded by Baillie Lodges, Tierra's new owner.

Every element of Tierra seems to have been built to frame the Licancabur volcano, the most powerful deity of the area's indigenous Lican Antay community. Tierra's lobby and restaurant have floor-to-ceiling windows, behind which rise towering stone walls (reminiscent of nearby Inca structures) that bookend the distant volcano. Beneath these are sunken lounges that, in the evening, glow with bonfires.

The guestrooms, too, all have views over the pointy peaks of these volcanic Andes. Stays include not only cocktails and three-course meals but daily adventures or activities (such as forest bathing). Guests get a refillable water bottle, day pack and reusable bag to stuff with the dried nuts and fruits available at the adventure desk.

General manager María Jose Galleguillos says the 28 guestrooms were entirely refurbished over the past year, including the addition of two apartments and four suites, the latter of which come with plunge pools, fireplaces and private guides. "This hotel opened in 2008, so it was needing some love," she explains, noting that the original architect, Matias Gonzalez, and interior designer, Carolina Delpiano, returned to work on the renovation. They partnered with more than 40 local artists and designers, giving the refreshed hotel a strong sense of place.

Standard rooms now have Andean textiles on the beds, sun- and moon-themed art on the walls, local herb-scented soaps in the bathroom, and eye-soothing wood panelling throughout. Thoughtful touches include a brush to dust off your boots and a humidifier to moisten the air. There's also underfloor heating in the evening and a mechanical roof shade on the terrace to block out the midday sun or reveal the starry sky.

That first evening at Tierra, I skim the edge of sleep, surfing through dreams in a half-awake state. This mild delirium is a reminder of my current elevation of 2400m above sea level. The next morning, as the sun rises behind Licancabur, I travel in a van further up into the atmosphere, rising past 4000m to visit the neighbouring Miscanti and Miniques lagoons. Flamingos prance through their deep blue waters, while vicunas (wild relatives of domesticated alpacas) munch golden paja brava grasses along the edge.

Later, our group of international travellers from Moscow, Melbourne and Mexico City visits two neighbouring salt flats, Salar de Talar and Salar de Aguas Calientes. We hike 3km through blinding white rocks to a lagoon that's as blue as Tahiti's Bora Bora. Meanwhile, the Andean peaks along the horizon are in pastel tones of ivory, coral and peach.

The landscape sparkles and shines. It is, in all of its definitions, brilliant. Yet, the air here is maddeningly thin. My teeth feel tense. My breaths are slower. My brain is a bit woozy. Meanwhile, the sun is so forceful it sucks the moisture out of my pores. But that's the price you pay to visit the Altiplano, or Andean Plateau, the second-largest high plateau on Earth outside Tibet. "There's something about the lack of oxygen that I really like," admits my guide, Macarena Barrientos. "It forces me to focus on what I'm doing, almost like walking meditation."

The next day, travelling in a new direction, Barrientos and I spot a herd of llamas. Then, hiking through the Purilactis Valley, we see more, except this time they're carved on to a canyon wall by the ancient Lican Antay settlers, who used river valleys like this for their trade routes. "They would travel in caravans with dried llama meat, called charqui, and trade it for dried fish from groups along the coast," Barrientos explains. "We also have petroglyphs of animals that are not from here, such as monkeys, which tells us about the communication they had with people from far away in the Amazon."

In San Pedro that afternoon I stop by the Padre Le Paige Archaeological Repository, named after Belgian priest Gustavo Le Paige, who moved here in 1955. Over the span of 25 years, the Jesuit missionary moonlighted as an amateur archaeologist, amassing a collection of some 380,000 pre-Columbian artefacts dating as far back as 10,000 BC. "Most of the objects come from funerary sites, and are associated with distinct individuals," says museum director Manuel Arturo Torres. "Taken as a whole, the collection speaks to the great prudence of these prehistoric people to be able to survive in such an adverse context."

On view are shamanic pipes, old stone axes, lapis lazuli necklaces, anthropomorphic pottery, wicker baskets and wooden flutes. The star attraction is a tunic intricately woven with alpaca threads during the Tiwanaku era, nearly two millennia ago. Universidad Catolica del Norte administers the collection, which has been housed in temporary containers for nearly a decade. Torres says various actors are now working together to build a proper museum. "The most important thing is that it will be developed with the consultation of the indigenous communities who live here," he assures.

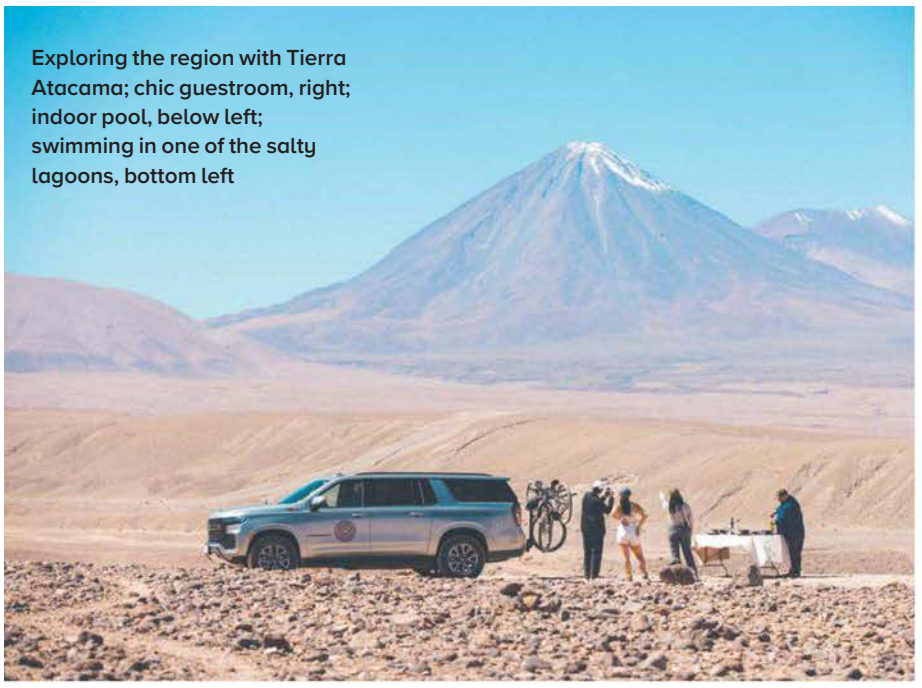
More than a single town, San Pedro is a collection of 14 ayllus, or indigenous-run territories. I travel out to the ayllu of Poconche, 12km from downtown San Pedro, to dine that evening at Ephedra. Sergio Armella, its 30-year-old chef and co-owner, trained to be a lawyer in Santiago but ditched that career during the pandemic and moved across the world to Copenhagen to train under chef Rasmus Kofoed at Michelin three-star restaurant Geranium. After staging thereafter at El Chato (in Bogota) and Borago (in Santiago), he returned to his native San Pedro to focus on hyperlocal Atacameno cuisine.

His restaurant lies in an unassuming stone-and-adobe building with an open kitchen and 12 tables overlooking Licancabur.

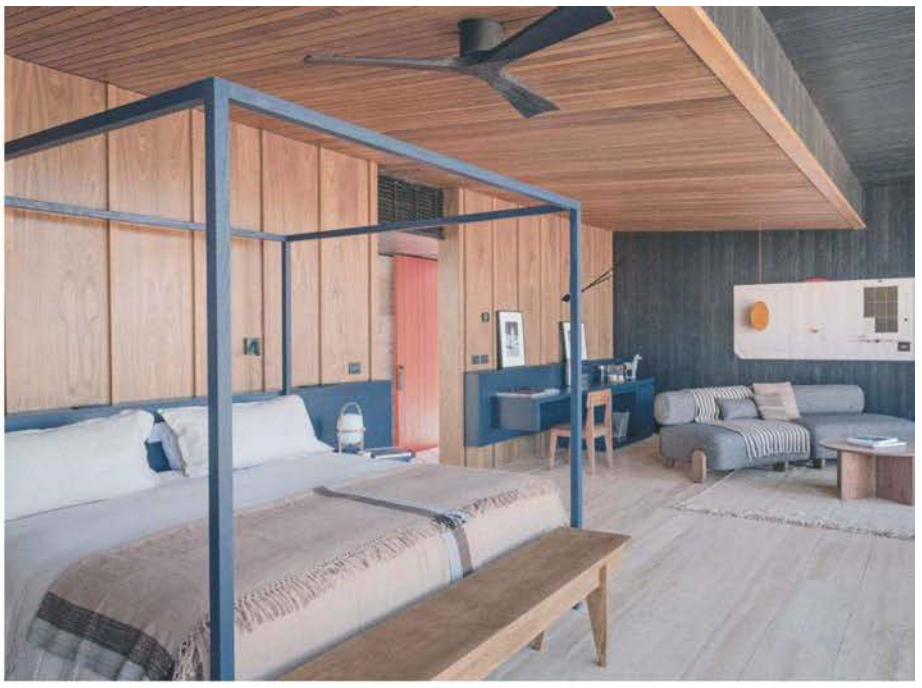
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Exploring the region with Tierra Atacama; chic guestroom, right; indoor pool, below left; swimming in one of the salty lagoons, bottom left







Diners choose from three to seven-course tasting menus, with nearly every ingredient sourced from the surrounding desert. Local providers bring Armella items such as pingo pingo (its reddish fruit, ephedra, gives the restaurant its name) and suiko (a high-altitude plant with aromas of citrus and menthol that was formerly used for bush teas). "There are many elders who know things about these plants," he says. "But if nobody documents that now, this knowledge could be lost." Armella didn't eat ingredients like this as a kid; San Pedro in the 1990s was already transforming into a modern tourist town. "That's why I'm so into it," he says. "It's a way to fill certain gaps in my identity. Before this, I was a little reticent about my culture, and that's a shame."

I start my seven-course journey with a Mexican-inspired mole made from nutty chanar fruits. Mains include a cured and grilled trout atop endemic potatoes, as well as a molecular version of a traditional rabbit dish, picante de conejo. For desserts, I start with a suiko kombucha sorbet topped with rica rica gel. The latter comes from a floral herb I've smelled on my hikes, and it's reminiscent of rosemary and mint. All the while the sommelier pours glasses of top Chilean wines, including a rose from Huasco, on the Atacama's southern edge.

On my last day in San Pedro, I bike 17km from Tierra out to the 300sq km Salar de Atacama. Once there, I swim in one of its salt pools. Or rather, I float, as in highly saline waters, the human body mimics a rubber ducky. I'm still licking salt off my skin that evening when a 5.6 magnitude earthquake rattles the windows of Tierra's restaurant. Waiters rush out of the kitchen. "Please don't panic," one says. "In Chile, this happens all the time."

So we raise our wine glasses into the air and carry on. After four nights, I feel like I know all the guests, who've travelled with me on various adventures throughout my stay. They're worldly and adventurous, successful but not flashy about it. I dine with two tech entrepreneurs from Miami and then set off with them to view the night sky from a nearby observatory. The Atacama is renowned for its twinkling skies, housing two-thirds of the world's ground-based astronomy facilities. Through the viewfinder of a 16-inch (40.64cm) telescope, we gaze at the Milky Way, scanning the horizon for Mars, and then Alpha Centauri, the closest star to the sun. The moon soon crests along the eastern horizon, so we stare at it too, scrutinising its pockmarks and various shades of grey.

You come to northern Chile expecting a vast expanse of nothingness, yet I can't help but think that those of us in cities, sleeping under starless skies, may be the ones living in a void. If this trip has reminded me of anything, it's that deserts are never as empty as they seem. As my nature therapist told me back at the start, there's something really important about this emptiness. If you take the time to look closely, you find that it's really full of life.

Mark Johanson was a guest of Tierra Atacama.



IN THE KNOW

Double occupancy suites at Tierra Atacama start from $US1405 ($2160). The rate includes three daily meals, an open bar and access to the Uma Spa, which has wet and dry saunas, as well as pools. Also included are return airport transfers and two daily guided excursions.

tierraatacama.com
baillielodges.com.au

MORE TO THE STORY

OTHER MUST-SEE DESERTS

Great Victoria Desert

Australia's largest desert covers a staggering 350,000sq km of sandhills, plains and salt lakes. One of the best access points is the tourist-friendly opal mining town of Coober Pedy, where many residents live in underground homes. From there, head west on the Anne Beadell Highway to a string of protected reserves.

Arabian Desert

The 1962 film Lawrence of Arabia catapulted Wadi Rum, in the Arabian Desert of southern Jordan, to international fame. This striking sandstone-and-granite valley is now a UNESCO World Heritage site and major tourist attraction, thanks to its Nabataean petroglyphs, Bedouin camps and 120km-long Wadi Rum Trail. Nearby, is the ancient rock-cut city of Petra.

Salar de Uyuni

Bolivia's Salar de Uyuni is the largest salt desert on Earth, with cracked and honeycombed plains stretching for some 10,400sq km. Visit on a multi-day 4WD trip departing from San Pedro de Atacama during the rainy season (December to March) when Uyuni has its surreal mirror effect.

Sahara

The Sahara covers almost the entirety of northern Africa and is one of the most iconic deserts on Earth, thanks to its sweeping sand seas, or ergs. Moroccan towns such as Merzouga or M'Hamid are among the most popular access points, though many tours depart from Marrakech or Fes.

Thar Desert

Largely within the Indian state of Rajasthan, the Thar Desert (pictured above) is actually brimming with life. Its main hub is the extravagant medieval trading post Jaisalmer, which has a remarkable 12th-century fort, opulent haveli mansions and colourful craft bazaars. From there, frequent camel (or jeep) safaris depart for the wilds beyond.

Arctic Desert

Deserts aren't always hot, brown or covered in sand. In fact, the largest deserts on Earth are located in the polar zones. To visit the Arctic Desert, you'll want to board an expedition cruise plying the Northwest Passage on the northern coast of North America.

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