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JUST DESERTS

Peak luxury reaches new heights in Chile



ULYSSE NARDIN

FREAK

NO DIAL. NO HANDS.
NO BOUNDARIES.

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TRAVEL CHILE

Valley deep, mountain high

Kendall Hill discovers a slice of Antipodean luxury in one of the most remote destinations on the planet.

The point of hiking to the peak of a steep ridge on the second-highest plateau in the world is the views, obviously. Standing atop Devil's Throat, a gorge in the arid heart of northern Chile's Atacama Desert, I'm surrounded by three mountain ranges. The dark wall of the Domeyko Range to the west. The rippled wonder of the Cordillera de la Sal directly below, its bizarre wave formations like a storm-tossed ocean frozen in time …

" … And, to the east, we have the elegant and important Andes mountain range, with more than 45 volcanoes," announces my guide, Amaro Bravo. "To the northeast is Bolivia … to the southeast is Argentina. This is the biggest terrace on Earth!"

It's an extraordinary panorama, the horizon studded with more than a tenth of the world's volcanos. Dominating the landscape at almost 6000 metres is Licancabur, "the mountain of the people". With its collar of snow and perfect cone, it's the defining totem of this place and a constant presence of my days at the revamped Tierra Atacama, the latest addition to the Baillie Lodges portfolio.

Closed for a year and rebuilt literally from the ground up at a cost of $US20 million ($30.5 million), the 28-suite lodge has, hands down, the best views in the gateway desert town of San Pedro de Atacama. Almost every room and public space worships at the altar of Licancabur, a sacred presence and god-realm to the Atacameño people for millennia. Having stayed previously at San Pedro's other elite lodges, Awasi and Explora, I can say with confidence that Tierra now eclipses them all.

Highlights of the Baillie makeover include four brand-new suites with plunge pools, pendant fireplaces, maxi-bars and island baths facing Licancabur. My slightly less lavish sunrise room has the same arresting outlook while the 14 elevated poniente (sunset) rooms have double-barrelled aspects west over the Domeyko and east over the Andes. Two three-bedroom duplex suites face south towards Argentina with al fresco hot tubs for star-bathing. All accommodation opens off patio gardens – inspired by the nearby oasis of Jere Valley – planted with figs, cacti and crimson hollyhocks.

The rebuild has renovated every centimetre of the five-hectare hotel, which originally opened in 2008. Set behind a 19th century adobe wall – once a corral and watering place for cattle herded between Argentina and Chile – its entrance plaza of creamy travertine quarried in nearby Calama sets the tone for the new-look lodge: raw, sophisticated, endemic, with Chilean craftsmanship to the fore.

The centrepiece is a grand space housing the restaurant and bar, guide station and a snug lounge surrounding an open fire.







Clockwise from top: A Licancabur Volcano reflected in the Laguna Chaxa; An aerial view of the lodge's pool area; The revamped accomodations at Tierra Atacama; Views from an interior patio.
PHOTO: GETTY, DIEGO MARIN

Need to know

Rates Low season (May-September) rooms at Tierra Atacama start from US$1870 ($2850) per room, including all meals, open bar, excursions and return airport transfers.
Getting there LATAM flies to Santiago from Sydney and Melbourne, with daily services starting in November and December 2025, respectively, for the peak summer period.

Soaring walls of glass frame mesmerising scenery that forces guests to look up, look out, and appreciate where on Earth they are.

A shady grove of light-green chañar trees separates refreshment and relaxation areas. Follow the decking to the flash gym, another Baillie innovation, and a three-room spa with steamroom and yoga studio, sunken hot tub and twin pools. Spa manager Tamara Abril McPherson tells me the energy from the volcanos can soothe any problems. "You just connect with the land, with Pachamama, and it will help you."

I wake to crowing roosters and press a button to open the curtains and reveal – ta-da! – the seismic horizon silhouetted against an apricot sky.

It's a source of daily wonder to me that I'm surrounded by such luxury, with heated floors, coffee machine and drinks fridge, and a choice of indoor and outdoor showers. The first time I came to the Atacama more than 20 years ago there was neither hot water nor a reliable power supply. These days I have an ethanol fireplace on my terrace.

The food, too, is better than I remember. Tierra's supervising chef Rodrigo Acuña has worked in San Pedro for several years and has a network of producers in the surrounding ayllus or communities who put local lamb, potatoes, corn and honey on the table.

Breakfasts are buffet-style, with a short list of à la carte dishes cooked in the open kitchen. Lunches and dinners are three-course affairs, preceded by breads and butters and amuse bouches. There are hits – a tangy and textural ceviche of sea bass and plump corn kernels, a pleasant beef tartare and toasted-flour ice cream – and misses – a baked sea bass is criminally overcooked and the tuna tartare tastes mainly of salt.

All the more reason to tuck into Tierra's selection of Chilean wines from noteworthy vineyards, such as Matetic in the Rosario Valley, or one of the bar staffs' inventive cocktails, many of which incorporate local herbs such as the desert mint rica rica featured in the pisco sour. My weakness is the Juriques, a custard-apple-and-Patagonian-gin concoction named after a volcano and almost as dangerous.

Acuña has plans for a kitchen garden, and cooking and cocktail classes. He also wants to open an artisan market during the lodge's twice-weekly fire nights when chefs butterfly whole lambs over coals, asado-style, and flame-grill everything from vegetables to vicuña. There's a real party vibe to fire nights, kicked along by cocktails and wine.

While it's tempting to laze away days at the lodge, there's an enthusiastic team of guides itching to fill your days with adventure. Guests – mainly Brazilians during my stay, including a famous male pop star – can ride horses through canyons or head high into the altiplano to see the El Tatio geyser field erupt beside the Bolivian border.

I choose slower, more grounded options such as hikes in Devil's Throat and the Valley of the Moon, where philosopher guide Sebastian Bravo muses on life and its meaning as we scale ski-jump dunes and the calamine cliffs of a Martian landscape.

Another morning we head out of town to Guatin Gatchi, a striking gorge studded with century-old cardon cactus and fringed in silver pampas. Squadrons of greenish-yellow finches zoom overhead as we navigate a surprisingly technical hike that requires fording streams and clinging to cliff faces. "You must climb a little bit sideways, like a crab," Amaro cautions at the tricky bits. Incredibly, we have this dramatically gorgeous gorge almost to ourselves.

On the horizon in front of the lodge is the plateau of the 4800m Chajnantor volcano, home to the highest and most powerful observatories on our planet. In the indigenous Kunza language, Chajnantor is the "the place of departure" because it's so close to the heavens. Desert legend says this is also where UFOs land. Nothing would surprise me in this alien place.

Walls of glass frame mesmerising scenery that forces guests to look up.

The Atacama Desert is renowned for the clearest skies in the world and I spend each night staring at the stars, sometimes through telescopes.

One evening at the back of the lodge on a purpose-built viewing platform, and another at a small observatory outside town, away from what little light pollution exists in a settlement of only several thousand people.

I learn about the Atacameñan constellations that exist in the dark space between our own. One of them is Yacana, the celestial llama whose eyes are the pointers of our southern cross (Alpha and Beta Centauri). It walks beside a large river we know as the Milky Way. Other 'dark' constellations include a fox, a partridge, a snake, and a shepherd.

There's a similar timeless quality to the Salar de Atacama, the vast salt lake where mirrored pools of saline water ripple with flamingos fishing for tiny crustaceans. Beyond, a still-life of volcanos blushes pink, lilac, orange and smoky blue in the sinking sun.

On the hour-long drive back to the lodge, the Bravo boys produce groaning platters of cheeses, meats and dried fruit and pour double wines to sustain us. As darkness falls and the sky blazes to life, the desert's spell is stronger than ever. L&L

The writer travelled as a guest of Tierra Hotels and Baillie Lodges.