JENNIFER HALL

# High and Dry

*The surreal Atacama Desert has become a hotbed for upscale resorts, but this arid wilderness in northern Chile may not be ready for its newfound popularity.*

BY JENNIFER HALL

IT HAS NOT RAINED in the Valle de la Luna for two years, and the dusty red landscape looks otherworldly as Rosa Ramos, a guide for the Awasi hotel in San Pedro de Atacama, leads me up a sandy incline for a view of the national park's massive mineral sculptures, salt hills, and sand dunes. Such bone-dry conditions are the norm in the Valley of the Moon, but our sense of seclusion—aside from our driver, who waits below in an SUV, Ramos and I are the only people around—has become a rarity in this part of northern Chile's vast Atacama Desert.

"On a summer day there can be 500 to 700 people walking, like penguins, up this path," says Ramos, who has timed our excursion—at noon on a cool day in September—so that we can have this view of the valley to ourselves.

Ramos is one of a handful of Atacama experts employed by Awasi, which opened in the nearby town of San Pedro in late 2006. Awasi assigns a private guide and driver to each of its eight accommodations, and the teams can lead their guests at off-peak hours to the Valley of the Moon, the bubbling geysers of El Tatio, the volcanic hot springs of Termas de Puritama, the Atacama Salt Flat (home to three kinds of

***Sights like this Altiplano lagoon, which sits 13,000 feet above sea level, are more accessible to travelers than ever before.***

pink flamingos), the blue-green lagoons of the Altiplano, and other natural wonders. The hotel and others like it have made the Atacama's attractions more accessible than ever before, but the region's growing popularity may be putting the desert—and the communities it supports—at risk.

The Atacama, which stretches from the Pacific Ocean to the Bolivian and Argentine borders, is both the highest and the driest desert in the world. Locals like to say it has never rained in some parts of the 30,000-square-mile wilderness. When it does rain in places like the Valley of the Moon, salt is drawn up and out of the red earth so that for one or two months the entire valley is white—as if someone had sprinkled snow across the dunes.

Most of the Atacama's water supply, leftover from the last ice age, lies under the sand, and these springs have sustained human life in the area for 10,000 years. Hunters and gatherers for 6,000 of those years, the indigenous Atacameño eventually cultivated the land and domesticated animals. They are credited with breeding the llama from South America's camel-like guanaco, and the domesticated animal remains an important source of wool and means of transport in the region. Atacameño farming communities can still be found throughout the desert, although they are beginning to disappear.

Ramos, a member of the indigenous Likan-Antai culture, grew up in a community of 15 families in Machuca, an Atacameño town on the route to the El Tatio geysers. "Now just three people live there, because there is no school and the families have had to move to the bigger cities," says Ramos during our tour of the valley. The remaining women have started serving tea and selling handicrafts to passing tourists.

According to Ramos, Awasi is working with the people of Río Grande—which has a population of 70 and a relatively large school of 10 students—to plan routes and itineraries through the town and introduce guests to the Atacameño way of life. "One of the families recently visited Awasi," she says, "so they could better understand the resort's level of service and begin hosting a tea service for guests."

OVER CUPS OF *rica rica* tea in a dark sidewalk café, local tour operator Martin Beeris recalls a time when service in San Pedro meant schlepping scientific instruments. "The first foreigners here were researchers and geologists," says Beeris, a fit, 50-year-old Dutchman who moved to Chile in 1988—when there were just two hostels in San Pedro. "Some friends told me about this pretty little oasis," he says. "I had long hair back then, and I was making these love bracelets and selling them in the plaza."

When General Augusto Pinochet's dictatorship ended in 1990, Chile gradually began opening up to leisure travelers. "Chile was one of the last unexplored places on this continent," says Beeris, who eventually transitioned from jewelry making to guiding. After becoming a driver for, and collaborator with, the researchers and geologists and learning about the region's geography and history, he opened a small tour company in San Pedro called CosmoAndino Expeditions. "In the mid-1990s there were all these people wanting to go explore this new location in South America," he recalls. "They didn't want to go on tour, they wanted to discover. Now people want a package deal. That's what's changed."

San Pedro has also changed since the time Beeris arrived. The city's one main street is now lined with small-scale tour operators, wine bars, and handicraft boutiques. In addition to hostels and other budget lodgings, the area is home to several new or newly updated high-end resorts. The first, Explora Atacama, celebrated its 10th anniversary last year with a $7 million renovation. Another upscale property, Tierra Atacama—operated by the same family that owns the Portillo Hotel & Ski Resort outside Santiago—opened in February 2008.

Hilko Meine, a German guide for Tierra Atacama, says San Pedro's population was 1,500 when he moved here 12 years ago. Now it is closer to 4,500. While riding in one of Tierra's 12-passenger vans, Meine tells me that "water may be *the* factor that determines how big San Pedro can grow." Meine, who sports a tuft of goatee underneath his bottom lip and a floppy hat attached to his backpack, claims that a well Explora dug in 1998 went dry in 2007. Still, he believes tourism is good for the area, because it is a more sustainable industry than farming.

Beeris, however, fears that the new resorts that have opened off the main road in San Pedro's various *ayllus* (communities) are not connected to—or concerned with—the Atacama. "They built a big pool in the middle of the driest place on the planet," he says of Explora, a walled-in retreat on the outskirts of town, adjacent to Tierra Atacama. Explora, in fact, has four outdoor pools, while Tierra Atacama has one outdoor and one indoor pool. San Pedro's municipal water supply is limited and unreliable, so the resorts dig wells and install desalination plants. "Wells mean the water table is sinking," says Beeris, "and water is what it takes to survive here."

Beeris is also concerned about the impact that tourism is having on local communities. His tours visit the Atacama's natural attractions, but he generally avoids bringing guests to the outlying villages. "That's the thing with tourism," says Beeris, who is married to a woman from San Pedro. "You have to decide, do I touch this, or don't I? When you're connected to a place, you're inclined not to."

RAMOS' HOPES FOR the Atacama lie in educating her guests. During her tours, she teaches about the local flora and how the Atacameño use the plants for medicinal and other purposes. "The idea is that when you return home you have some idea about the desert, the mountains, the people," she says. "You can go home and speak about the Atacama."

Against her mother's wishes for her to marry within the culture, Ramos wedded a Swiss hiking guide and now lives in San Pedro with their two daughters. Formerly a guide at Explora, she has a university degree in tourism and has been instrumental at Awasi in planning several new routes for guests. "I like discovering places," says Ramos, who began leading visitors on the Matancilla route just a few days before I arrived.

During the drive to Matancilla and Río Grande, Ramos tells me that the compact salt road we are driving on was completed just one month ago. We come across a pedestrian standing beside the road with several nylon packages. "Would you mind?" Ramos asks me.

We pick him up. No public buses serve this route, and the walk from Calama (a copper-mining town with affordable food markets) to the surrounding small towns takes from four to six hours, depending on how many groceries are in tow. Reaching the turnoff to Matancilla, we stop to let the pedestrian out.

"Here we enter into the rainbow area," Ramos says as we drive onto an uneven dirt road. Before we reach the colorful Matancilla—where copper and salt deposits have striped the jagged hills green, white, and red like the Italian flag—we pass a number of old estancias and llama corrals leftover from migrating shepherds. "Of course there are fewer and fewer shepherds," she says. "Now the shepherds' sons build ugly weekend houses here to claim the land. They bring all the things that they don't want to keep at their houses in the city."

In front of one house are collections of old pipes and oil drums, a twin bed frame, and a rusted trailer. We pass three wild donkeys. "Their parents were probably used as pack animals," Ramos says. "But they are no use now because people have cars."

The rainbow hills serve as colorful backdrops to bizarre clay columns that appear to grow up out of the ground along the trail we hike at Mantancilla. The sky is clear and blue. Ramos points out a dying patch of foxtail. "There was probably a spring there a few years ago," she says as we head back to the car.

Back on the new road we pass a few of the Atacama's seven nature reserves. After turning into one of the reserves' entrances, we encounter a post guarded by a young woman with wide sunglasses, dangle earrings, and black-washed jeans. She removes a pair of white iPod headphones from her ears, collects our entrance fee, and climbs back up to her post. "These [seven reserves] have been national parks since the 1970s, but the government didn't have enough money to regulate them," Ramos says of the Atacama's Los Flamencos National Reserve system. "In 2006 they started taking an entrance collection so they could clean up after people and regulate behavior."

That regulation has become essential in Los Flamencos' Valley of the

***The Atacama is a hot spot of volcanic activity, with attractions such as the Valley of the Moon (left) and the geysers of El Tatio (right).***

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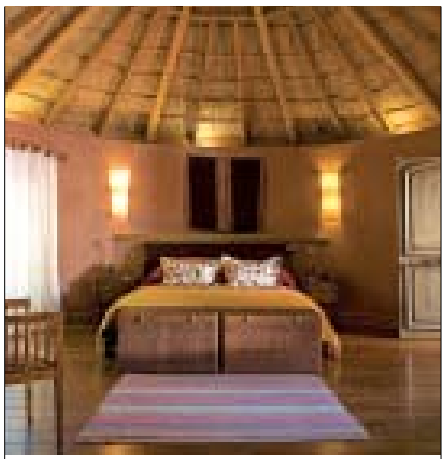
***Swimming pools, like this one at the Tierra Atacama resort in San Pedro, are a popular and controversial amenity in the desert.***

Moon, where people used to climb up the Tres Marias rock formation to take pictures. About five years ago, one of the Marias fell down. Now there are Dos Marias. A large dune adjacent to the sandy incline that Ramos and I walked up in the Valley of the Moon had sunk several feet from foot traffic; the Chilean government has now posted a sign on the spot that reads "*No caminar por los costados*" ("No walking on the sand dunes").

Other, more significant actions by the government in recent years—including building the guardhouses and staffing them with locals—indicate that Chilean authorities have reached the same conclusion as Beeris and other locals: The continued success of the Atacama as a tourist destination requires regulating the way people enjoy the desert. "Some of these places can take just 10 to 15 people at a time," says Beeris, who started the Atacama Council of Special Interest Tourism (www.desiertodeatacama.org), an organization that is working alongside the national tourism department to promote the Atacama with foresight and responsibility. "Before we tell the whole world to come discover us, let's think about the demand that the environment can hold. If 1 million people want to come to the Atacama, we'll say 1,000 can come, and the rest can go to the beaches."



***Andean weavings influenced the textiles that grace Awasi's eight adobe houses.***

ON MY LAST MORNING in the Atacama, I wake up in one of Explora's four newly refurbished suites and, after breakfast, meet my driver and guide, Ricardo Stuardo Tomasevic. Thirty minutes later, I am trekking along a high cornice and peering into the mineral-rich Salt Mountain Range—which contains the Valley of the Moon and the neighboring Valle de la Muerte ("Valley of the Death"). Compression forces and erosion have molded the red mountains so that they look as though they are reaching out with thousands of sandy fingers. The range proceeds gradually from a rounded peak, breaking out into fingers that cluster and then split again into more fingers that sparkle with gypsum and quartz. The web is endless and mesmerizing.

Tomasevic, who grew up in Santiago, moved to the Atacama because he wanted to be somewhere sunny and with a longer travel season than Patagonia, where he guided for four years. "Living here," he says, "I see more so than in other places that everything—the rocks, the stars, people—is connected." Tomasevic lives with Explora's 17 other guides in an adobe house at the back of the hotel's 42-acre property. The group is young and energetic, with good English skills; the most experienced guide at Explora has been in San Pedro for eight years.

Hiking up and out of the Salt Mountains, Tomasevic and I reach a plateau that looks out to the range and a green river valley where the Likan-Antai still farm the land. "This cordillera," he says, pointing to the mountains, "is the volcanic Andes range, the spine of the Chilean people." Rainfall running from the Andes peaks moves the mountains' soft volcanic materials down to the valley, where hot, dry conditions cause the water to evaporate.

After hiking for three hours, we return to the hotel. I am hot, sunburned, and in need of refreshment, so I change clothes and go for a swim. R

## Desert Oases

**SAN PEDRO DE ATACAMA serves as the jumping-off point for most travelers exploring the Atacama Desert. The town and its surroundings include several hostels, budget lodgings, and, more recently, luxury hotels. Following are San Pedro's top three retreats.**

**AWASI**

**The atmosphere is cool and dark within Awasi's eight adobe houses, each of which has a straw roof and outdoor shower. Common spaces by the pool, in the open-air restaurant, and by the fire feel intimate and peaceful. In addition to a guide and driver for each house, the hotel employs the best chefs in San Pedro. The property may eventually have a sister hotel in Patagonia.** ***(All-inclusive from $1,280) +56.55.851460, www.awasi.com***

**TIERRA ATACAMA**

**This 32-room family resort has a spa and views of the 19,404-foot-high Licancabur volcano. Guests with accents from all over the world dress casually and gather in the evenings for three-course meals before relaxing by the big fireplace in the lobby and returning to sparsely decorated quarters.** ***(From $370) +56.2.263.0606, www.tierraatacama.com***

**EXPLORA ATACAMA**

**Opened in 1998, Explora was the first resort of its kind in San Pedro. In addition to 52 refurbished rooms, including four family-size suites, the property features a new restaurant, stables, four pools, hot tubs, a spa, a library, and a planetarium. In the evenings, guests can take astronomy lessons and peer through the property's new Meade 16-inch f/10 tLX200R Advanced RC Telescope, as well as map out the next day's excursions with the help of Explora's resident guides.** ***(All-inclusive from $1,920 per person, double occupancy) +56.2.206.6060, www.explora.com***