

A person in a black wetsuit and red hat is on a blue paddleboard in a calm, light blue lake. The background features a vast, colorful mountain range with shades of red, orange, and white under a blue sky with light clouds. The mountains have a layered, geological appearance.

DISCOVERING

Chile

AN
EXPLORATION
OF THE
ATACAMA
DESERT

BY CARINE CAMBOULIVES



Last year, together with Manu, our two daughters Lou (9) and Shadé (3), we had the opportunity to do a home exchange for seven months with a Chilean family. A rich experience for the whole family giving my daughters the chance to learn Spanish and for Manu and I to achieve the old dream of discovering Chile.

After a few months spent in our new home in a coastal fishing village of Central Chile we took off to the high altitude lakes in the Cordillera of the Andes.

Our destination was the picturesque adobe town of San Pedro de Atacama. San Pedro appears like an oasis in a middle of nowhere. It is like driving on the moon.


Approaching San Pedro, the landscape changed as we were going up the dangerous and winding road of La Cordillera de la Sal. Those Salt Mountains molded through the time by the extreme climate of Atacama, the driest desert on Earth, look like natural sculptures with different types of stratifications and colorations. “Look at the sign!” cried Lou, pointing at the entrance of the Valle de la Muerte - the Chilean version of Death Valley.

For two weeks we explored with our SUP this extraordinary scenery of salt flats, lagoons, and geysers between 7900’ and 16000’ altitude. Apart from a morning bloody nose, and a light headache, everyone was acclimating well. Drinking Coca tea helps. The endless Salar, filled with pink flamingos, offered numerous lagoons perfect for SUP-yoga. One day, I lost my balance and fell in the turquoise water. The density of salt was so high that my ears, nose and eyes started burning like hell! Once dry, my yoga pants stood up by themselves!

It’ was almost winter and all the Lagunas Altiplanicas (high altitude lagoons) were partly frozen. I had to break the ice with my paddle to find a path. Lou was completely relaxed and made fun of me as I started to panic, screaming and



crying: “I am gonna lose my fingers!” My llama’s wool gloves are not waterproof.

Driving back each evening to town was an enchantment as the sun was setting down on the Volcanos and the Moon Valley. The light was changing each minute. The same half-blind wild fox stopped our car a few days in a row asking for food and water. To relax our sore muscles, we swam in the Puritama hot springs at 11,400 feet, sipping a Pisco Sour mixed with Rica-Rica, a medicinal herb endemic to the area, under an unpolluted sky. 

Road book:

Getting there :
Daily flights with LAN Chile,
from Santiago International Airport.
www.lan.com

Where to stay:
Plenty of options from Youth Hostels
to high-end resorts. We loved
“Hostal Pueblo de Tierra,”
small and affordable.
www.pueblodetierra.cl/en/

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