EXPLORER

# Into an Ancient, Arid Land in Chile

By STEPHEN PAUL NASH

IF you've heard of the Atacama Desert in northern Chile at all, you're likely to know one thing: it's the driest desert on earth. That's all I knew going in, though it triggered my reflexive mistrust of superlatives.

The Atacama is so dry, in fact, that NASA has chosen it as a research analogue for Mars, testing techniques for how to detect life in a seemingly sterile environment. (There are said to be children who have grown to adulthood there without ever having seen rain.)

Science supports this lore, and adds another distinction: a desert for more than 10 million years, and perhaps far longer, the Atacama could be the planet's oldest. In technical terms, this is an "extreme" or "absolute" or "hyperarid" desert. But like most summary descriptions — accurate only at a great enough distance — you'll find it deeply misleading when you actually get there.

The Atacama is arid, all right, but only occasionally hot, with daytime temperatures averaging in the 80s in the summer months of January, February and March.

And it covers 54,000 square miles. The barren, super-dry places are just part of a landscape whose open secret is water. A line of snow-laden, Fuji-form volcanoes rear abruptly along the eastern horizon. They feed a lacework of narrow, lush stream valleys, oases and salt lagoons, which sustain native Atacameño hamlets with meticulously kept colonial-era churches. Flocks of scarlet-orange flamingos blazing like sacral pyrotechnics rise from the lagoons.

The usual entry path for a trip to the desert is a two-hour flight from Santiago, Chile's capital, to the industrial outback city of Calama. From there you can rent a car or take a hotel shuttle about an hour south to the more interesting San Pedro de Atacama, a town of about 5,000 that serves as the base camp for the visitors who plan to head out on foot, by car or on horseback on various excursions in the area.

The town's main thoroughfare, the Caracoles, is closed to cars, with the result that an inviting languor prevails. Narrow dirt streets are flanked tightly by high adobe walls. The walls are taupe, the color of the ubiquitous chusca dust of the enfolding desert, as are the buildings of the little business district, our hotel, and many of a legion of amiable street dogs.

But eyes adapt to this kind of seeming uniformity, just as they do to darkness. Slowly, chroma and variation emerge. Occasional flashes of high color — the pigments of flowers, a ragged cobalt sky, an old shirt in a herder's abandoned hut — can prompt something close to sensory overload.

Where to stay? The options range from hostels to haute resorts. My wife,

*In the high Atacama Desert, lagoons and petroglyphs.*

Linda, and I decided to splurge, big time, on the Awasi, an eight-room hideaway whose prices can, like the elevation there, induce lightheadedness.

Along with superb meals, what makes the price tag palatable is that it includes your own private guide and also a driver, sometimes for 10-hour days of exploration, tailor-made for your interests and disinclinations. The guides we met had deep knowledge of the cultural and natural history of the desert, and arranged to take us to exceptional places at times when tour buses and big vans were nowhere to be seen, or to places where large groups do not go at all.

Our peripatetic five-day visit was well fortified by the Awasi's cuisine, which might include a midday meal of salmon and scallop carpaccio, grilled albacore, saffron rice and a dessert of chañar (a local fruit) honey — and nougat.

Other upscale hotels have guides and drivers for group tours of various sizes to many of the same destinations, or you can book tours in town. You can also rent a car and navigate on your own, avoiding the more challenging roads.

But our driver was at times indispensable: some roads are rough, tending toward impassable, especially when flooded by snowmelt from the Andes, looming on the near horizon. Other, better roads are known for errant drivers, wandering animals and signless turnoffs. Not to have to cope with these distractions is the essence of luxury.

An easy first trip is to the Cejas and Chaxa lagoons, which provide a chance to acclimatize to the 8,000-foot elevation around San Pedro. Their chief attraction is large numbers of three of the world's six species of flamingo. A low, loud whisper caused by air pushing off their broad wings announces takeoffs and landings at surprisingly close range.

THE NEW YORK TIMES

A longer drive took us higher — up to about 14,000 feet — to the Tatio geysers, which can apparently send scalding streams of water 20 feet into the air — a symptom of the same, very active geology that makes Chile home to so many earthquakes. In fact, we missed the waterworks, which occur in the mornings. Opting for an afternoon visit to avoid the crowds, we witnessed instead a friendly gurgle not much more vigorous than a school water fountain.

We found consolation in skewers of grilled llama meat from a roadside stand and in the sight of those same lovely animals. We also saw guanacos, vicuñas, wild donkeys, nesting Andean Tagua coots, Pato puna ducks with vivid blue bills, and a dozen other bird species, but very little human traffic.

Unfortunately, the savory Chilean cabernet we drank with our picnic came at a price: a walloping headache and 90 minutes of altitude sickness during the drive back. It was cured by a crossword puzzle and a small pot of coca tea, the local antidote, and quite legal.

Other treks into the desert reveal an ancient record of human history. Just outside the small village of Talabre, on the high rock walls of a jagged ravine, the ur-Atacameños etched countless petroglyphs of flamingos, rabbitlike vizcachas, and spectral human figures. One is bent in a votive posture that suits the spirit of the place, an homage to the silent red cliffs and empty, endless sky.

All that focused labor was a reminder: the artists managed to find enough water to linger near these stone chambers for a string of centuries, like a long-sustained chord. Then the arrival of the Incas and, soon after, the conquistadors changed the music.

Talabre itself is new on the landscape. Its population relocated here from several miles up-canyon only in 1985. "I've been told that they moved so they could get away from the volcano," our guide told us, and indeed nearby Volcan Lascar is the most active in the region.

"But when you ask the people who live here, they say that wasn't the reason," he added. "They've always lived near that volcano, and they weren't frightened." The cause was more likely that the particular stream supplying the village with water had dwindled for some reason, so the inhabitants moved closer to another, more reliable source.

The old Talabre is now a ghost town of crumbling walls and crashed-in thatch. Wooden chairs, kitchen utensils, a pair of overalls suspended on a line, a church with a muddy picture of Jesus still posted near the ruined altar. It's as if, once the decision was made, everyone made a fast, very final departure. Only the cemetery is still tended.

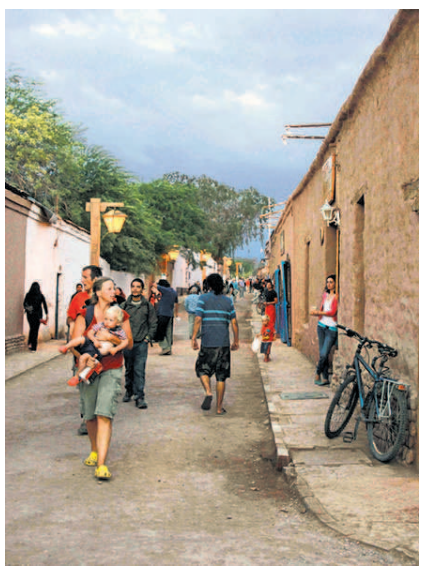
Our last day's route took us back through Calama on our way to Chiu Chiu. In passing, we saw the tall, billowing smokestacks of Chuquicamata, one of the world's largest open-pit mines, beyond on the northern horizon.

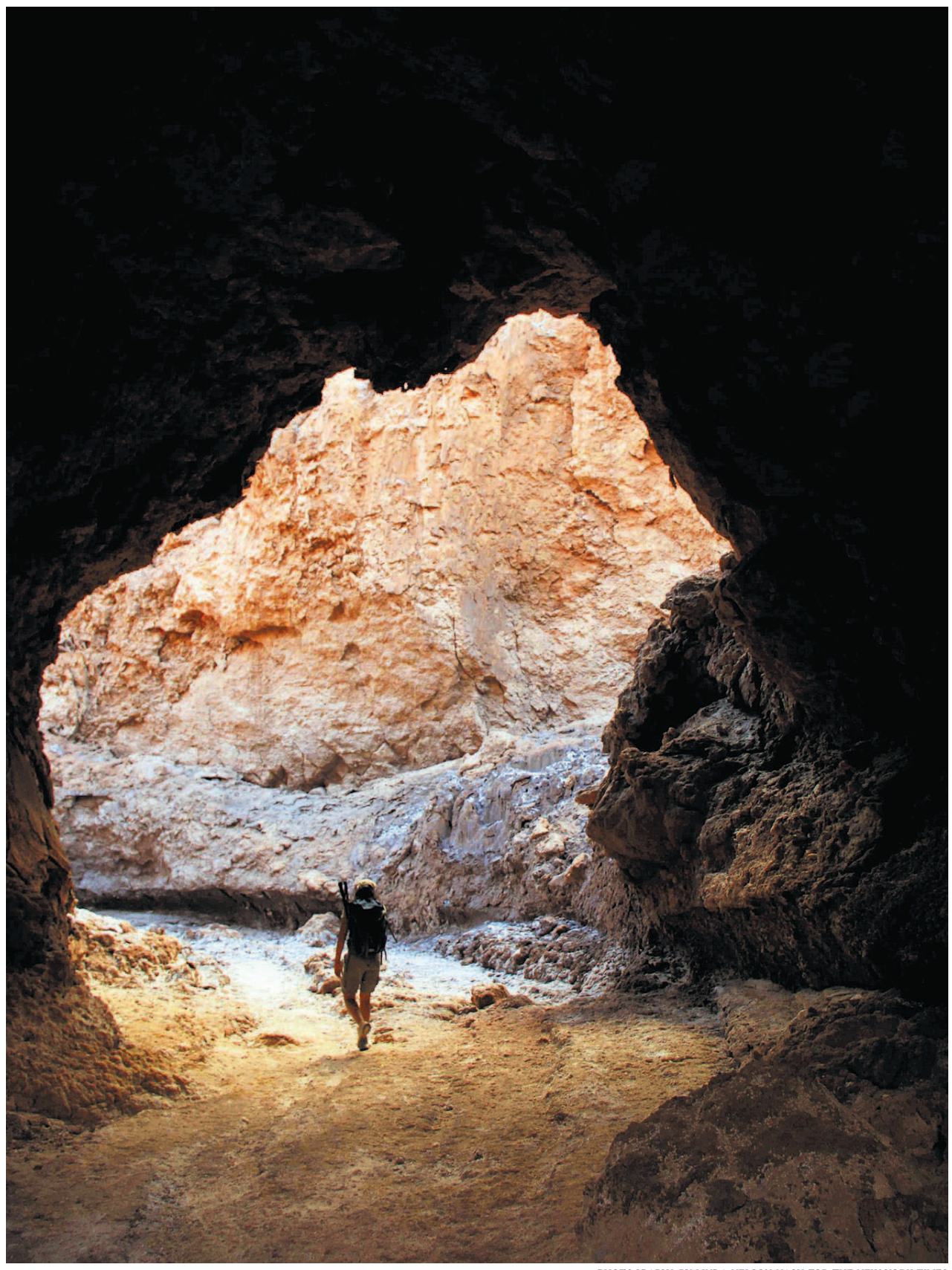
The highly visible shroud of regional pollution generated by this government-run copper mine seems to do little to dim many Chileans' pride in its productivity. It is a linchpin of the nation's economy. But our guide told us that the continued functioning of the Tatio geysers, and of some local agriculture, is threatened by aggressive plans for mining expansion in northern Chile because mining demands abundant water. An Atacama mine collapse a year ago trapped 33 miners who were rescued after more than two months underground.

By this point, I was fending off thoughts of ticket lines and security checks at the airport at Calama, and, of course, the trip home. That was all made easier by our second-to-last stop, at the small town of Chiu Chiu. Its church, our guide noted with a wry smile, is said to be the oldest in Chile, dating to the mid-1600s.

The melting contours of San Francisco de Chiu Chiu's whitewashed adobe walls frame a deeply shadowed interior. It is partly finished in cactus wood, peopled with the figures of adored saints, severe and benign by turns, and includes almost no hint that anything much has occurred in the outside world during the last century or so.

This was the last of several small, exquisite churches we visited, at least three of which have some basis for claiming to be Chile's oldest. Like every other ultimate in the Atacama — the driest, oldest desert; one of the biggest mines; the odds-on favorite for the next volcanic eruption — this one is a kind of celebration, whatever its other merits. Superlatives here tend to expand, rather than narrow, the range of possibilities. ■





PHOTOGRAPHS BY LINDA NELSON NASH FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

ABOVE Hiking through a natural tunnel in the Atacama Desert. LEFT FROM TOP Strolling the pedestrians-only Caracoles, in San Pedro de Atacama, the base for visitors to the desert; Andean flamingo at Chaxa lagoon; llama by the road to the Tatio geysers; and sandboarders in the Valle de la Muerte.

## IF YOU GO

### GETTING THERE

There are several flights a day from Santiago to Calama via LAN Airlines. Arrange with your hotel for a transfer to San Pedro de Atacama, or rent a car.

### WHERE TO STAY

San Pedro has inexpensive commercial campsites, hostels and small hotels of varying quality. Check carefully, as some are reputedly noisy, dirty or generally less inviting. Leave a tip for anyone who's helpful. Ten percent is considered good at restaurants; generosity never hurts.

For the high-enders: the 32-room **Tierra Atacama** (tierraatacama.com; 800-829-5325) in San Pedro de Atacama is an exercise in high design — severity meets luxe, with straight lines and interiors that complement the desert milieu. Rooms look out onto the Licancabur volcano and surrounding peaks. The all-inclusive price for five nights, which includes small-group guided tours, is $2,190 per person. Shorter stays are available.

The eight-room **Awasi** (awasi.cl; 888-880-3219) in San Pedro, where we stayed, faces inward, to a pool, a pit fireplace, a bar and a restaurant with an open kitchen. The design is eco-friendly and serene, made up of local adobe, straw and swaths of stone and river rock. The rates for a five-night stay in high season (Dec. 20 to March 31) are $3,515 to $4,225 per person and are all-inclusive, including your own guide and driver.

AWASI

Courtyard alcove at the Awasi.

### WHERE TO EAT

The town of San Pedro is a bazaar of hole-in-the-wall crafts shops, and small restaurants. Many serve pasta dishes like spaghetti carbonara or lasagna.

At the six-table **El Charrua** (Tocopilla 442, near the corner of Caracoles; 56-55-851443), I ate a better-than-fair capellini with basil pesto sauce for $8.

Other places serve variants of noteworthy Chilean cuisine — local food without much spice or other distinction, but worth a try, like pastel de choclo, a potpie with chicken chunks, a couple of olives and half a hard-boiled egg under a layer of melted cheese. A more expensive version is pastel de loco, which features a seafood base instead.

I tried pastel de loco at **La Casona** (Caracoles 195, lacasonadeatacama.cl), along with a tasty empanada called pino del horno. A catalog of great desserts is on offer as well.