

Breathtaking Chile

“GO UP like an old man, come down like a teenager,” advises Pablo. I’ll second that. I’m 200m from the summit of 5600m-high Toco Volcano in the Chilean Andes and I feel 108.

At this altitude, every step is a breath-sapping test of physical and mental endurance. I’d never understood why climbers sometimes turn back within a few hundred metres of the top. Now I do.

The appeal of Toco is that it’s not a technical climb. A van delivers us to 5000m, from where it’s a relatively gentle 600m ascent over rocks and then snow. I expect us to make the summit in about half an hour; 90 minutes later we are still going.

Finally we reach the boulder-strewn plateau and collapse into breathless, grinning heaps. The views are stunning. We are surrounded by dozens of snow-capped 5000m peaks that stretch from Chile into neighbouring Bolivia. Cobalt-blue lagoons stud the valley floor and the Atacama Desert, one of the driest in the world, fades into the horizon.

Through binoculars we can see the ALMA project, a collection of 66 radio telescopes being built on the 5000m Chajnantor plateau. When completed at the end of next year, it will be the most powerful radio telescope in the world.

Taking Pablo at his word, I spend most of the descent on my rear, sliding joyously down the snow-covered slopes while whooping like a 14-year-old.

Climbing Toco is the highlight of an action-packed three days at the up-market Alto Atacama resort in northern Chile. In a spectacular red rock valley 3km from the quaint town of San Pedro, this 32-room lodge offers a wide range of excursions to surrounding areas. Some require altitude acclimatisation (the resort is at 2400m), so the day before tackling Toco, I did the 15km Shepherds’ Trek from the tiny hamlet of Machuca (pop 7) to the comparatively bustling Rio Grande Village.

Starting at 4000m, the trek followed the winding Rio Grande River through a valley dotted with 10m-tall cordon cacti. As we descended, the scenery changed from a barren, rocky wilderness to a lush Eden-like oasis bordered by chocolate-coloured clay hills resembling giant mounds of gelato.

There are also lots of less taxing options, including a tour of the nearby Atacama salt flats, a trip to the El Tatio geyser field and an excursion into the lunar-esque Valley of the Moon. Some of the activities are based around the resort and I particularly enjoyed the post-dinner stargazing session. The elevation and lack of light pollution produced one of the busiest night skies I’d ever seen.

Excursions are included in the rates

Peak performance

The climb to the summit of South America’s Toco Volcano will leave you breathless in more ways than one, writes **Rob McFarland**



Go2 CHILE

Getting there

LAN has daily flights from Australia to Santiago via Auckland, with onward connections to Calama. The resort is a one-hour transfer from Calama airport. Ph 1800 558 129, see www.lan.com

Staying there

All-inclusive rates at Alto Atacama resort start at \$US446 (\$A410) a person a night for a three-night stay and include all meals, excursions and transfers to and from Calama. See www.altoatacama.com

More: www.chile.travel



HIGH ACHIEVERS: Celebrations on reaching the top of Toco Volcano (top); and Pablo the guide relaxes after the climb (above). **Pictures:** Rob McFarland

and utilise the resort’s guides and private fleet of mini-buses.

The sauna and steam room are surrounded by landscaped gardens full of native flowers and cacti, and a variety of treatments are available.

Having just climbed a volcano, I indulged in a wonderful sabia massage, which uses a heated pouch of herbs to soothe tired muscles, before

retiring to one of the resort’s six secluded plunge pools.

All meals are served in the resort’s indoor/outdoor dining area and I had to keep reminding myself that I was in the middle of an inhospitable desert. Breakfast is a sumptuous hot and cold buffet, while lunch and dinner are three-course affairs featuring a combination of Mediterranean and

Chilean cuisine. A typical offering was quinoa tabouli to start, followed by tortellini stuffed with goat cheese. Desserts range from creme brulee to the resort’s homemade ice cream. Everything is washed down with a selection of Chilean wine.

The resort’s canny low-rise design and use of natural-coloured adobe walls and native wood means it is almost indistinguishable from the surrounding valley. The rooms are spacious, with dark walls, large bathrooms and terraces that offer mesmerising views of the Andes.

Parts of the Atacama Desert haven’t received rainfall for 300 years, so water conservation is paramount. Every guest is given a refillable water bottle to use and the resort has its own water treatment plant. It’s refreshing to see refillable containers for shampoo.

The only blip on the report card is that some of the staff have limited English, which led to frustrating exchanges when ordering in the restaurant, and an entertaining mime act during my massage.

The writer was a guest of LAN and Alto Atacama.

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