



This All- Inclusive Resort Packs in Tons of Adventure- And Zero Planning

Ahead of the solar eclipse, four days in the Atacama Desert

*By Mary Holland
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On July 2, 2019, a solar eclipse will cross over Northern Chile, straight through the heart of the barren **Atacama Desert**. Months before hotels fill up and travelers from around the world wander into the desert watch the moon pass in front of the sun, blacking out the entire sky for a few minutes, I explored the area—sort of by accident.

I'd wanted to see the glaciers and peaks of **Patagonia**, but due to a series of factors (mostly the fact that it was winter), I altered my plans and detoured to the Atacama, a bone-dry plateau that extends for over 620 miles along Chile's northern coast. With its pitch-black night sky and jaw-dropping stargazing, otherworldly Moon- and Mars-like landscapes, and a slew of adventure activities (like hiking, biking, and horseback riding) to keep busy, it turned out to be the perfect place for my solo adventure. Here, how I did it in four days.

Day one

Following a full night of flying (Cusco to Lima, Lima to Santiago, Santiago to Calama, all aboard LATAM), I arrived in the [Explora Atacama](#) hotel on the outskirts of the dusty town of San Pedro de Atacama feeling as dried-up as the desert itself. Almost immediately, I sat down with the head guide and mapped out a rough four-day itinerary. (I recommend at least four days in the area to get used to the altitude.) The Atacama is known for its varying landscapes and I wanted to hit as many as possible—including visiting Cerro Toco, the dormant volcano that sits at 18,401 feet above sea level, on my final day. Not only did I want to catch great views from the top, I wanted to take advantage of my acclimatized state—so I worked with the guide to slowly increase my elevation daily in order to be prepared for Cerro Toco’s high altitude.

Exhausted by the 14-hour journey, I opted to see the 1,700-square-mile Salar de Atacama salt flat, a relatively low-key overland activity in terms of what's on offer here. After an hour-plus drive from the resort, we arrived at the rugged, grayish flat covered by shallow pools of water, which nearly blended into the horizon were it not for the scattered flocks of Chilean flamingos punctuating the view. As the evening passed, the flat turned pink in color, mirroring the setting sun, and the flamingos became almost indistinguishable from the water’s reflection. To add to the grandeur, the large, white moon rose from behind the surrounding low mountains. Suddenly, the arduous journey felt extremely worthwhile.

Day three

Hiking up the Cerro Toco volcano isn’t a simple feat, so in preparation for my fourth day, I trekked along the six-mile Rio Blanco trail, which snakes past fiery, 200-plus degree geysers, mineral formations, and a peaceful creek. During the (roughly) eight-hour expedition, the terrain evolved dramatically. At the beginning, we brushed a few feet past powerful geysers that belched boiling water every few minutes. At lunchtime, we rested alongside the creek, where we settled on soft tufts of yellowy grass and dipped our tired toes in the

warm water fed by natural hot springs. By the time we finished the hike a few hours later, we'd reached a thick carpet of snow.

Day Four

Halfway up Cerro Toco, the wind whipping against my face and the high altitude stealing the air from my lungs, it was hard to remember why I was there in the first place. Unlike the constant stream of dramatic landscapes in the Moon Valley, all I could see in front of me was snow-dusted brown rock and shale. Turning back would be to admit defeat, so I took a swig of water and put one foot in front of the other until my narrow footsteps lead me all the way to the top.

At the summit, my guide poured me a shot of Shnapps and took pictures of me standing beside a stick wrapped in scarves, a makeshift monument that greets all climbers at the top. For 360 degrees, you could see flat brown plains dotted by smaller volcanoes smudged with snow—but those magnificent views were short-lived, due to an icy wind that made it unbearable to look out for too long. In the photographs, you can hardly see I'm smiling; my windbreaker was zipped up to my nose and the hood sucked tightly over my head. But underneath the layers, I was gleaming—chuffed as cheese I made it all the way.

On my final night, I headed to the hotel's private observatory with its own advanced optics telescope—the stars were so bright, it looked as though someone had flicked each of them on with a light switch. An Explora guide offered a brief talk and pointed out iconic star formations like the Southern Cross, explaining that the Atacama's sky is so clear not just because of the lack of light pollution but because of the altitude and moisture-free air, too. But to be quite honest, I had a hard time listening: seeing the Milky Way with so much clarity left me positively starstruck.

How to get there

LATAM offers direct flights from New York City, Miami, and L.A. to Santiago. From there, it's a short flight to Calama and a one-hour drive to San Pedro de Atacama.

Where to stay

Hotels with included expeditions like [Explora](#) are perfect for solo travelers and families who want easy access to guided tours and hikes. There are other more budget-friendly hotels in San Pedro Atacama like [Casa Solcor](#) and [Atiplanico](#). For expeditions, book ahead with a tour company like [Volcan Paniri Tours](#).

Know before you go

If you (like me!) want to climb Cerro Toco, it's absolutely necessary to spend a few days acclimatizing. The recommended time is between four days and a week. Looking for more of a low-impact trip or have accessibility concerns? Many of the desert's highlights (stargazing, salt flats, the Valle de la Luna) are easily accessible by car.