

SO FAR SO GOOD

Chile is a long way to go for your snow, but whether it's accessing 6000m peaks by heli or sweeping down classic runs in Portillo resort, by pisco it's worth it

WORDS Leslie Woit



Run names are like poetry. From clever alliteration to meaningless metaphors, the monikers attached to mountain routes can beckon, inspire and occasionally intimidate us. Some are funny, some forgettable. In terms of understatement, the one I'm about to ski takes the biscuit.

Just moments before, I'd bounced into a shiny white AStar helicopter and been lifted weightlessly above the floor of Chile's Maipo Valley. With me in the back, a friendly lawyer and accountant from Santiago and charming Rodrigo Mujica, co-owner of Powder South Heli Guides. In the front, US-born Jerry Hance, our guide, and pioneer of hundreds of first descents in Alaska in the early 1990s.

Frisky and excited, the boys are like bulls in a pen. Impatiently, guests at Powder South's lodge had waited several days for a massive weather system to dump a one-metre payload over the central Andes, and this morning we'd watched the August sky turn from fuchsia to crimson, to amethyst to sparkling lapis lazuli blue. Payback time.

At the top, we clip in the pins that arm our avalanche airbags, and wedge the tails of our fat skis into the snowpack for stability. Almost two vertical kilometres roll out beneath us, a precious path of deep diamond dust. Amid the pounding whirr of the receding helicopter, Rodrigo's long Chilean mane flutters in the wind and his smile blinds us with promise. "Hey Leslie," he shouts, "So far, so good."

SO FAR, SO GOOD – THE PERFECT NAME for a perfect run. Rocketing from nearly sea level up to 6700m, the central Andes dwarf most European peaks by half. So impressive are they that when the plane encounters the pencil-thin cordillera some 14 hours after leaving London the pilot dings the seatbelt sign, allegedly to prevent everyone rushing to one side to drink in the snow-capped spectacle.

Powder South Heli's cosy and elegant El Ingenio Lodge is an hour and a half's drive from Santiago. Beyond its helipad-friendly garden unfurls a wild, unfathomable, elevated jumble of glaciers, gullies and ridges, with landing zones located between 2500m and 4500m. "You will feel incredibly small when you get into these mountains," Rodrigo had told me as we approached the helicopter. "You can't even land on top, the mountains are too big."

After the drop we're engulfed by a white army of these 6000ers, peaks that Rodrigo, a UIAGM mountain guide, spent his teenage weekends climbing. Into the faultless deep snow we plunge, into pristine runs with funny names – Courchevel, ►

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Endless untracked runs among towering 6000m peaks are the rewards of a heli adventure in Chile



Santiago sizzle

Tall, thin and sexy, Chile is the happening place to extend, or indeed to jump-start, your winter. A night in Santiago makes recovering from the long flight a pleasure, and adds a Latin-laced dose of southern city life.

Start your tour with the best view of the city, from Cerro San Cristóbal via funicular, swing by the large outdoor Patio Bellavista to pick up elegant knitwear and jewellery souvenirs, and don't miss the Mercado Central – Santiago's barnacle-studded fish market.

Whatever time you finish, the W Hotel will be buzzing. An epicentre of Santiago nightlife, its restaurants, bar, rooftop pool and nightclub are the happening spots to see and be seen among



South America's beautiful set. Dinner happens well after 9pm so the pisco hour can stretch into two or three.

The W can be the base for the ultimate urban ski experience as it's equipped with a rooftop helipad – you can fly from Santiago with Powder South Heli to snorkel through Andean powder by day, returning to groove by night. Rooms at W Hotel Santiago (starwoodhotels.com) start from \$299 per room per night. Visit tourismchile.com for more about Santiago.

These runs are so long I can feel time expanding and the universe stretching

Tignes, Superbowl, Alaska – as diagonal blasts of shimmering powder explode from our turns like a squadron of snowblowers gone berserk.

Our whoops and wails ring out across the empty Andes. The only answer back is our screaming legs demanding a break. These runs are so long I can feel time expanding and the universe stretching. And what with this being the southern hemisphere, north is now sunny and south is weirdly shady, and we're flying so high that I'm sure one of these descents will end up in a bar in Tierra del Fuego with Alice in Wonderland and a big white rabbit smoking a cigar. No, I haven't been slipped some mescaline. Apart from the powder, the only drugs in this mind-bending pleasure paradise are the perfect pisco sours that we drink on the terrace at après time, surrounded by daffodils. After a rest, dinner is served family style around a long table or, on warm nights, outside, with a huge pan of paella or a barbecue around a bonfire, in quasi-supine blissed out recovery mode.

"For most people, this is a once in a lifetime thing," Rodrigo tells me, passing the bottle of Chilean merlot I am too tired to reach. "A good story for the cocktail party, a been there, done that deal." I vow to return, thanking heaven for Rodrigo and reincarnation.

THE FOLLOWING DAY, LEAVING THE MAGIC of Maipo Valley behind, I come down from one high and head for another, weaving along the switchbacks on the road up to one of skiing's most classy and classic destinations, Portillo.

The resort of Portillo – up there with St Moritz and Courchevel for pure snob appeal – is by definition exclusive – there is just one groovy yellow

hotel, its 500 staff catering to just 450 international guests, often including ski teams in training, plus the handful of weekenders who drive the two hours from Santiago. The mix makes it a giant golden petri dish of romance, ski racing and relaxation.

Sat at his usual table for dinner, strategically situated to oversee the action, as he's done for over four decades, Portillo's softly-spoken owner Henry Purcell says, "We only allow one national ski team at a time, so they don't bother the guests." Bother? The resort is buzzing in anticipation of US poster girl Lindsey Vonn's arrival, and the Austrian men and Slovenian superstar Tina Maze are also here. As if on cue she walks past, iPad in hand, fresh from downhill training and glowing like a Diana of the mountains. Over in the corner, is that Benni Raich having a coffee? Is he even allowed coffee? The place is a jaw-dropping panoply of ski gods, not to mention a magnet for high society and Hollywood, as it has been since the day it launched in 1961.

In this microcosm of alpinism, Henry fills me in on a few of Portillo's legendary deals, divorces and duels (he recently wrote a whole book on its 50 year history). Ski school directors have included revered former ski racers Emile Allais and Stein Erikson. In the '60s Castro dropped in. After arguing with Henry that Cuba had higher mountains, he was so distracted he left his gun behind on the table. When Juan, the maître d' who reigns over the dining room to this day, dashed out waving the pistol to return it, he was nearly shot.

Next, Henry nods to a corner of the bar where, in 1966, when the likes of France's Jean-Claude Killy, Austria's Toni Sailer and Canada's Nancy Greene assembled for the World Championships, plans for skiing's annual World Cup series were hatched by Serge Lang on the back of a napkin. What better use for a ski hotel's linen could there be?

AMID THE WHEELING AND DEALING, THE atmosphere is relaxed. This is Latinland after all – everyone is here on seven-day packages and there are no lift lines. At 10.30am the Brazilians are still in bed and the hotel bar (legendary for five decades of fabulous parties) has only been closed for a few hours. With the place to ourselves, I hop on the ►

Main picture: At this altitude, no one can hear your legs scream. Below from top: US ski team hotshot Lindsey Vonn; Fidel Castro of Cuba in the '60s



CHILE



What's a pisco sour, you ask?

The local tipple of Chile and Peru is a cocktail made from pisco – grape brandy – whizzed up with fresh lemon, icing sugar and egg white, and topped with Angostura bitters. Sharp and refreshing with a healthy bite (not only from the vitamin C), it's Chile's pre-dinner drink of choice.



With its famous visitors, all-night bar and slopes on the doorstep, Portillo's iconic yellow hotel provides all the entertainment you could ask for

The panorama is wide and wild and the snow is fabulous and forgiving

chairlift with my small party, and we pause at the top to watch a few chiselled Austrians in catsuits kick-start out of some race gates, make two turns and disappear over a crest. That takes about four seconds.

The biggest challenge of the day is riding Roca Jack. A five-person t-bar on speed requiring the dismount dexterity of Nadia Comaneci and the verbal negotiation skills of Ban Ki-moon (riders must agree who gets off first or risk disaster), Portillo's contribution to ski lift technology is also known as the slingshot. It's a hairy ride but gets you to lots of traversable off piste as well as steep and deep chutes like the Super-C Couloir – sadly, too avalanche prone during this unseasonably warm week for my taste.

It's easy to be fooled by the piste map into thinking there's not much here – it shows just 35 groomed runs. To get the most from a week it's essential to get into the easily accessed off piste. For those who aren't backcountry-ready, the resort has an excellent ski school (many US instructors do year after year of north/south hemisphere loops) and a host of powder clinics with celeb instruction from the likes of Chris Davenport and Kim Reichhelm.

After a few days the snowpack stabilises and I finally get the chance to ski a Portillo classic. At the top of another slingshot called Condor, we take a long skier's right traverse across to the renowned Lake Run, a wide open, hour-long lap that first threads through a rock cleft then leads us down, down, down through mushy spring powder to end as close as we dare to the edge of the mirror-flat, blue expanse of Inca Lake (well, it's blue for me, normally it is frozen white). The panorama is wide and wild, and the snow is fabulous and forgiving. We finally come to a stop on a peninsula, searing under the hot spring sun. Stripping down to one layer, we put skis over our shoulders to negotiate a walkway custom-blasted into the rock face, usually skiable, but not this week because of the heat.

Lake Run is my last run, though I hope it's not going to be the last time I aim for the great yellow cruise ship on the horizon. Long may she sail – so far, so good, so long for now. ■

► NEED TO KNOW

Three days with Powder South Heli (heliskiguides.com) cost from €5665 per person (based on eight heli passengers), including 10 hours flight time, four nights' accommodation, meals, guiding, safety kit and transfers from Santiago. Seven nights in Portillo (skiportillo.com) costs from £1210 per person, including accommodation, lift pass and all meals. Flights from London to Santiago take around 14 hours via Madrid and start from £1039 return, including taxes, with LAN (lan.com).

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