

## **Easy Atacama & Altiplano (14 days / 13 nights). Guided self-drive tour**

*This 14-day guided self-drive tour takes you through the stunning landscapes of the Atacama Desert and the Chilean Altiplano-Highland while travelling in a small group. You drive independently in a rental car while an expert English-speaking tour guide gives you a daily briefing on the respective route. Now and then, (s)he might even accompany you in your car personally. A pre-programmed GPS facilitates orientation.*

*This novel way of travel allows you a certain degree of independent planning, while at the same time being accompanied by an expert who knows the local customs well.*

### **DAY 1: CITY TOUR SANTIAGO**

After pick-up at Santiago Airport, you are taken to your hotel in the center. Here you meet your fellow travelers for the next two weeks and are welcomed with Chile's national drink, the Pisco Sour. We then embark on a city tour to get a glimpse of this metropolitan city. Amongst others, we visit the historic old town, the market, the cathedral and the main square (Plaza de Armas). San Cristobal Hill rewards us with stunning views of the city and the impressive Andes Mountains – a constant companion during our time in Chile.

*Accommodation: Hotel Boutique Carmenere in Santiago*

### **DAY 2: SANTIAGO - CALAMA - SAN PEDRO DE ATACAMA (90 km (56 mi), 2 h drive) (B)**

After breakfast, a flight takes us from Santiago to the mining city of Calama in the north of Chile. Our tour guide welcomes us upon arrival and we are handed over the keys to our rental cars. It's time for our first ride in convoy – through the world's driest desert. It's a leisurely drive to the oasis town of San Pedro de Atacama, where we'll spend the next days.

*Accommodation: Hotel Altiplanico in San Pedro de Atacama*

### **DAY 3: ATACAMA SALT LAKE & MOON VALLEY (B)**

There are many possibilities to explore San Pedro's spectacular surroundings; one of them is a trip to the Atacama Salt Flats. Its extensive surface is covered with glittering salt crystals. This dried-up inland sea, formed millions of years ago, is an overwhelming sight and one of the most impressive landscapes on earth.

There is probably no better place to watch the sunset than the Moon Valley (Valle de la Luna). From the valley's highest dune, we enjoy fantastic views over bizarrely shaped desert rocks. Snow-covered volcanoes form a spectacular backdrop, with the perfect cone shape of Licancabur Volcano being the most impressive. The last rays of sunshine paint the tranquil landscape in bright shades of orange, red and violet.

*Accommodation: Hotel Altiplanico in San Pedro de Atacama*

### **DAY 4: GEYSIRES EL TATIO (160 km (100 mi), 3.5 h) (B)**

Getting up in the early morning hours today might not be easy, but the reward makes it worthwhile: Watching the sunrise over one of the world's most important geothermal fields, the El Tatio Geysers. At an altitude of over 4,000 m (13,000 ft), more than 70 geysers eject boiling hot water out of the ground. Early morning is the best time to observe the steaming geysers that contrast with the intense blue sky.

On the way back to San Pedro, a stop at Machuca is a good option; this Atacameño highland village consists of around 20 houses made of clay, straw and cactus wood. Its inhabitants dedicate themselves to tourism and offer handmade souvenirs and typical regional dishes such as lama meat, sopaipillas (a traditional pumpkin bread) and empanadas.

*Accommodation: Hotel Altiplanico in San Pedro de Atacama*

DAY 5: SAN PEDRO - PICA (420 km (260 mi), 5 h drive) (B)

Today it's time to say goodbye to bustling San Pedro, and we make our way further north to the small town of Pica. It is here where the famous Pica lemon comes from. In fact, the fruits grow alongside the road. A worthwhile detour on the way leads to the so-called painted geoglyphs, where we can marvel at more than 400 well-recognizable figures. There is also a small museum on-site, while a short hiking trail leads along the mountain range. After a long car ride, the nearby hot springs of Mamiña, Macaya and Lirima invite to a visit.

*Accommodation: Ecocamp Huarango near Pica*

DAY 6: PICA - IQUIQUE (120 km (75 mi), 2 h drive) (B)

Today a leisurely drive leads us from Pica to the lively coastal town of Iquique. On the way, we have the opportunity to visit the former saltpeter mines Santa Laura and Humberstone. Both of them are ghost towns nowadays, protected by the UNESCO for once being the main saltpeter suppliers for Europe and the United States. The rest of the day is at leisure.

*Accommodation: Hotel Holiday Inn Express Iquique*

DAY 7: IQUIQUE (B)

Today we take it easy and get some rest, before our journey leads us up into the highland in the subsequent days. The wide beach Playa Brava lends itself to some relaxing hours at the seaside. Another option is visiting the Cavanca Peninsula with the church Grotto de Lourdes, or a walk along Baquedano Street, flanked by Georgian-style houses.

*Accommodation: Hotel Holiday Inn Express Iquique*

DAY 8: IQUIQUE - COLCHANE (240 km (150 mi) and 4 h drive or 420 km (260 mi) and 8-10 h drive) (B)

We continue our journey from the coast to the Altiplano highland, where breathtaking scenery awaits. All participants can decide for themselves whether they want to go directly to Colchane or take a detour on gravel roads across the Huasco Salt Flats.

During the ride, we slowly get accustomed to the altitude of almost 4,000 meters (13,000 ft), at which we will spend the next days. Once acclimatized, we can fully appreciate this region's outstanding natural wonders and exciting encounters with its few inhabitants, most of whom belong to the Aymara people.

*Accommodation: Hotel Isluga in Colchane (very basic)*

DAY 9: ISLUGA NATIONAL PARK/ GEYSERS OF PUCHULDISA (B)

This day is at leisure for the exploration of this unique and little developed highland region. Flamingos and alpacas can be observed at Arabilla Lagoon; there is a hike along the shore to stretch our legs. We continue to the barely visited Puchuldiza Hot Springs, where geysers and fumaroles spew boiling hot water to the earth's surface. There are two pools for bathing while taking in breathtaking views. Parinacota Lagoon is well worth a visit as well; it can be accessed via the abandoned Aymara village Latarani.

*Accommodation: Hotel Isluga in Colchane (very basic)*

DAY 10: COLCHANE - SALAR DE SURIRE - PUTRE (250 km (150 mi), 8-10 h) (B)

Today's route along mighty volcanoes leads us north to one of the highlights of our tour, the Surire Salt Flat. Its snow-white surface is one of the little known and visited natural wonders of Chile, situated at an altitude

of 4,200 m (13,800 ft). Impressive volcanoes and turquoise-colored lakes with several different flamingo species make out the picture. It is possible to swim in the Polloquere Hot Springs, located in the flat's southeastern corner. We then continue further north to the highland town of Putre, near the Bolivian border, where we'll stay for the next two nights.

*Accommodation: Hotel Qantati in Putre (very basic)*

#### DAY 11: NATIONAL PARK LAUCA (B)

Today there is plenty of time for a trip to one of the most impressive protected areas in Chile: Lauca National Park. Apart from the surreal views of volcanoes and lakes, there are over 150 different bird species in the park. It is worth visiting Chungará Lake, which is located just before the Bolivian border at a staggering altitude of 4,500 m (14,700 ft). Its surface reflects the majestic volcanoes Parinacota (6,110 m / 20,000 ft) and Pomperane (6,232 m / 20,400 ft). The unique and – despite the harsh climate – quite diverse flora and fauna is impressive; flamingos, guanacos, llamas, alpacas, vicuñas, condors and vizcachas are commonly observed. On the way back to Putre, it is possible to take a detour to the small town of Parinacota.

*Accommodation: Hotel Qantati in Putre (very basic)*

#### DAY 12: PUTRE - ARICA (140 km (90 mi), 3 h drive) (B)

Today we make our way back to the coast to the city of Arica, our final destination. The village of Socoroma is worth a stop; on the terraced fields surrounding it, agriculture is still practiced just like the Incas did hundreds of years ago. Rather than taking the main highway, it is an option to take the route through fertile Azapa Valley in order to reach Arica.

*Accommodation: Hotel Apacheta*

#### DAY 13: ARICA (B)

We take it easy on our last day in Arica, also known as the driest inhabited place in the world. The wide beaches of Chile's northernmost city lend themselves well to a long walk. Those interested in culture should not miss a visit to the Archeological Museum of San Miguel de Azapa. The Morro Hill, which is of historical importance, offers beautiful city and sea views.

*Accommodation: Hotel Apacheta*

#### DAY 14: ARICA - SANTIAGO (B)

The last car ride of our journey leads us to the airport of Arica, where we drop off our rental cars and say goodbye to our travel group. A flight takes us back to Santiago, from where you can continue your journey or take a connecting flight back home.