

# THE ANDES & *Beyond*

Craig Tansley discovers the hidden delights of Chile and Bolivia on an adventure that takes him far from the madding crowd...





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## I'm falling for the swagger of this South American city

### CHILE & BOLIVIA

Santiago wasn't always this cool, surely? I've always come through Santiago on my way to a South American adventure far from here in Brazil, Ecuador, Peru and Colombia. But as I sit now under the rising three-quarter moon on the rooftop of my chic hotel in inner-city Lastarria, with its views right out over the Andes, I'm falling for the swagger of this South American city.

It's a good omen for the start of a South American adventure – one that will take me to northern Chile and beyond to Bolivia and into Peru. Santiago, I thought, would be a place to grin and bear, but these days Lonely Planet describes Santiago as: “Surprising, cosmopolitan, energetic, sophisticated and worldly”. Its

city parks – my favourite by far is Cerro San Cristobal, which is so close to the urban chaos of the city but so far away at the same time – allow for the most stunning views of the Andes, though we're soon travelling to the coast, 90 minutes west to Valparaiso.

With its drastic-sloping streets facing the Pacific, Valparaiso is one of the most unique cities in South America; and has been one of its best-kept secrets. Valparaiso was once the most important shipping port in the Pacific, attracting settlers from across Europe who brought with them their architectural styles.

It went into decay when the Panama Canal was built, but now it's World Heritage listed, and stunning. Historic

- 1.- Santiago and the Andes
- 2.- Valparaiso
- 3.- Atacama Desert luxury camping
- 4.- Alto Atacama
- 5.- Altiplano en route to Bolivia



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funicular elevators take me up to Valparaiso's steepest suburbs where coffee drinkers sit at sun-drenched cafés in cobbled squares. Narrow laneways run past murals, buskers play tunes, and houses every colour of the rainbow look across a pretty harbour. How the whole city doesn't fall down into the sea is a mystery.

Next, we fly to the world's driest desert, the Atacama, two hours flying time north of Santiago. Hollywood has used the Atacama to depict Mars; some areas within the desert have received no rainfall in 400 years. On the drive through San Pedro, shepherds herd goats and llama through the town's dusty streets, between centuries-old buildings of adobe brick. The night skies here are the clearest on Earth, 80 percent

of the world's astronomical infrastructure can be found here, and I take a drink from the hotel bar and sit outside watching a Milky Way that extends all the way from one side of the sky to the other.

There are many activities to try – I stay at Alto Atacama which offers over 30 options. I take a 4WD across the desert to geysers 4,300 metres above sea level, travelling past pink flamingos feeding in salt lagoons. And I hike through Rainbow Valley, a 100-million-year-old enormous crevice in a mountain range. We travel across dry river beds till I arrive at a gap in the mountains where a Bedouin-style tent has been set up for me to spend the night, after a dinner prepared by a private chef.



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We leave next day, and the moment we move into Bolivia nothing seems the same. "Forget everything you know about Chile," guide Erich Hochhauser tells me. The roads – bitumen till now – have turned to volcanic ash. Everyone gets about in LandCruisers, the only vehicles tough enough for travel here on the high volcanic plain (altiplano), where we'll reach altitudes of 5,000 metres above sea level.

We pass through the surreal-looking Desert Of Dali where pink flamingos stand in green lagoons. Then we're driving across the world's largest salt flat – 12,000 square kilometres of white crust, surrounded by brown mountains and volcanoes. We reach a silver Airstream camper parked in the middle of the salt flat, where a



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smiling chef is holding out a tray of canapés and wine.

Bolivia's neighbours, Peru and Chile, attract millions of international travellers, but Bolivia remains something of a mystery. There are no other travellers around me now – in fact, I've seen only a handful all day. Out here, when we build a wood fire and eat under a billion stars, there are no other lights.

The rising sun lights up the volcano (Tunupa) which towers above. We visit the farming community nestled beneath the volcano, where locals go about their ancient tasks much as they always have. I'm driven to a cave beside the village; a farmer follows me on a moped and kick-starts an old generator into life to light up a chamber of stalactites and stalagmites. Tourism goes like this in Bolivia; it's like you've travelled back through time, and it's fast becoming one

of the country's most significant industries – but for now, you can enjoy it without the crowds.

Even the capital La Paz is mostly empty of the types of group travellers you see in so many destinations today. But this is one of South America's most pretty cities – built at 3,500 metres above sea level (it's the world's highest capital city). I walk along narrow, cobbled lanes, and through gaps in the streetscape I see snow-capped mountains.

In the evening light I couldn't imagine a more stunning city on Earth: from the bar of my hotel, Casa Grande, I look up at escarpments of rugged orange-brown rock. It's a great city to walk in, if you have the calves for it, for there are no flat streets. There are modern cafés here to sit and people-watch in, but there are also markets where shaman still rule.

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- 6.- Laguna Colorada, Bolivia
- 7.- Airstream camping, Uyuni Salt Flats
- 8.- Lake Titicaca
- 9.- Local Bolivian colour
- 10.- Cable car, La Paz



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We move onwards to Bolivia's most popular tourist region, Lake Titicaca, and yet it's still peaceful here, and there are few visitors to deal with. It's here on the Bolivian side of the lake that the Andes are more visible, some peaks above are nearly 7,000 metres high. Around here, I pass by fields of potato, maize and quinoa farmed by locals in traditional dress.

I take a hydrofoil to the Island Of The Sun. Agricultural terraces – thousands of years old – are cut into the sides of the island, and are still farmed by the 800 families who live here. I sit outside a restaurant on a terrace overlooking the lake while a local family prepares my food.

I cross into Peru next day, and while the history and the scenery of the country are overwhelming, I can't help but hark back to Bolivia and its lack of crowds, and to Chile, a country I'd never thought to visit, but which offers so much for the adventure-seeking traveller. 🍷