

ALNORTE ~~~~~ TOTHE STARS

A fabulous road trip to the Atacama desert including incredible raptures about Chile. Try it for yourself!

Text & Photos
Michael Neumann

A

dull day in March in the office. The phone is ringing! Volkswagen is calling. Could we imagine testing a new car, the Tiguan Allspace, for its road-trip capability? Where? That choice is ours, there is only one condition: The desired destination should be located in South America because the car is built in Mexico and available there first. Well, we can do that... Thank you and talk to you soon!

As soon as I put down the phone, we are overcome by wanderlust. A carte blanche for South America, can somebody give us a prod please? We throw countries around the room. Peru? Bolivia? Chile? As our list of places that one should see is endless, there are a lot of places flying around. What was the name of the car again? Allspace? It is probably referring to size. What about interpreting the name afresh? On top of the list we have "Star gazing in Atacama". The desert in the north of Chile is known to be the most suitable place of the world to see the Milky Way and the Galaxy at its best. This is possible because of its altitude of between 2,500 and 5,200 metres, minimal light pollution because of the lack of big cities and the stable weather conditions which pilots like to call CAVU: Clear Above Visibility Unrestricted. That means the human eye cannot see any further. To get there, we would drive 1,700 kilometres from Chile's capital Santiago to the north to San Pedro de Atacama. Although almost all tourists take the plane to get there, we want to approach the Atacama slowly to appreciate the scale and change of the landscape from the ever-green Santiago to the driest place on earth.

ROADTRIP, BABY!

Volkswagen agrees and we take a look at the calendar. For optimal star gazing conditions, we need a new moon. If the moon is too bright, it steals a lot of the light emitting from the Milky Way. We make a big cross on the 23rd of July. On this day, the moon is in the shadow of the earth and cannot reflect any sun light. Two more travellers are quickly found: Gex and his girlfriend Mona. I already went skiing with Gex in Chile twice in August. His high spirits and open-mindedness make him the perfect travel buddy. And his basic Swabian virtue of thrift protects

the travel kitty from possible drinking bouts or gambling excesses. Mona also comes from the Swabian Alb region, so I assume similar genes. Wait a second, did we not just mention skiing in connection with the month of August? Exactly, from mid June until mid September it's winter in Chile as it is situated at the opposite side of the globe to Central Europe. But no worries, there is always sun in the Atacama and even during the dark season, the mercury does climb up to 25 degrees. We pack tent, sleeping bags and – just in case – the touring skis. Better be safe. And indeed, when we arrive in Santiago on the 17th of July, there is new snow from the day before. There had not been so much for 40 years. Even in Santiago, only a few hundred metres above the sea, there were ten centimetres. Now, 24 hours later, it's all over. The sun is laughing against a bright blue sky and project Atacama is about to start. The car – a Tiguan Allspace – is a 20-centimetre longer version of the Tiguan and turns out to be perfect for our tour. It offers space in >>



Good morning,
beautiful Valle de la Luna!

Is this earth or are we already
on Mars? The Atacama often
feels like a different planet.



abundance, has many common assistance systems which make travelling distances as comfortable as possible. There is also all-wheel drive and enough ground clearance for gravel roads and mountain passes which we will undoubtedly come across. When you fold down the back seat, there are two metres in length to lay down in – the double bed in the desert is ready. Only the white seat covers are a disadvantage when hosting dusty travellers.

DRIVING, LOOKING, MARVELLING - AND THE SAME AGAIN

We quickly leave Santiago and take the road up north. It's a 10 hour drive to San Pedro according to the smartphone navigator. Well, let's get going! First, we drive along the coast where the sun is about to sink into the sea as standard. So we indicate to the right and head off down to the beach. When the game is over, we eat at a nearby seafood restaurant and move into our Allspace suite afterwards. Okay, I admit, one of us needed to sleep next to it in the tent. What a shame that the sun does not rise in the west too. The next morning, it is bright early but it takes a while until the planet has climbed above the Andes at an altitude of almost 7,000 metres. So, we packed up the tent covered in morning dew and drove on.

With a length of 4,200 kilometres from north to south but only an average width of 200 kilometres, Chile is not really suitable for an illustration sticker like those of Sylt or Lake Constance. It would probably look like a scratch in the paintwork. A beautiful one though. Chile has a lot to offer from above. Our target destination of Atacama is situated on the border to Peru. It is known to be the driest spot on earth; only recently have scientists held a competition to find the driest point there. Maria Elena South won with 14 % soil moisture content at a depth of one metre – just like on Mars.



In the centre, the metropolis of Santiago attracts foodies to its surrounding wine-growing regions. The harbour city of Valparaiso leaves >>

You can find flamingos at Laguna Chaxa, or maybe take a swim in Lagunas Escondidas de Baltinache (big picture).

In some places, salt deposits make the Atacama look like a winter wonderland.



A whole year in two weeks:
In Chile, you can go hiking in July in temperatures of 25 degrees, camp under the Milky Way, take a swim or bath in hot springs and, afterwards, enjoy the view when skiing.

you speechless. It is built on 40 steep hills on the Pacific Ocean coast and makes San Francisco's streets look like a kindergarten. Steps replace footpaths, and in some dead-end roads you prefer to reverse back out rather than do a U-turn. But of course you do not thunder down into the valley when the car is at 180 degrees. Another show are the ten thousand elaborate graffiti which elevate even the last corrugated-iron shacks to a MoMA outpost. Further south and we move into the fertile lakeland area. Stratovolcanos tower into the air next to prehistoric araucaria trees, only the dinosaurs are missing. And then, the spectacular finish: Patagonia with its Torres-del-Paine Nationalpark. There is nowhere else offering more to look and marvel at.

In Chanaral, the mostly two-lane Panamericana highway goes inland. Overtaking is still no problem though as you can see the oncoming traffic on the now dead straight road ten kilometres ahead. For hundreds of kilometres, the landscape is just sublimely monotonous. It does not take long until we have fully succumbed to nature. Metallica's "Nothing Else Matters" is on repeat in the Dynaudio sound system and in this magic area, unexpectedly, the song unfolds to become immensely powerful. Just imagine driving from Munich to Hamburg across the moon landscape.

The next highlight is for technology freaks. The dusty La Negra near Antafagosta is all about mining and is where the surrounding copper mines stock up on their materials. Enormous monsters of technology – trucks – line the street to the left and right with wheels as big as single-family houses. And the drinking holes in between remind us of the Titty Twister Bar in "From Dusk Till Dawn". It is worth taking a look at Google Earth. Mad Max meets Tarantino. The billboards at the entrance to the town are fitting. They do not attempt to push Coca Cola, smartphones or detergent but lure foremen with head-high emergency generators and refurbished heavy-duty dump trucks.

In the evening of the second day, we enter San Pedro. The gathering of clay huts around a picturesque church has long since mushroomed to become a veritable magnet for tourists. San Pedro is THE hub for visitors travelling to Atacama or the nearby Altiplano, the highlands on the border to Bolivia. Located at an altitude of 2,500 metres you can devote yourself to some sightseeing but also climb some "easy" six-thousanders, assuming you are acclimatised. It takes about a week until you can slowly approach 5,000m altitudes and after two weeks, volcanoes above than 6,000m are possible. Often, it is not very difficult, you simply walk

up the direttissima. If you start puffing like an old steam engine however, to prevent altitude sickness you should quickly turn around. We postpone possible volcano climbs to the next visit and take a look at the classic highlights of the region. Those are: the geyser field of El Tatio where you get an idea of the centre of the earth when you see the bubbling fumaroles; the hot springs of Puritama; the lagoons full of flamingos; the drive towards Bolivia. From San Pedro, a tarred road heads straight towards the east and ascends 2,000 metres of altitude without a single turn. The altimeter displays a value of 4,800 metres at the top. We see individual cyclists that have tortured themselves up opposing sides and who are now about to start the downhill race of their life.

We sober up by walking through the Valle de la Luna at sun rise. Whilst it is filled with tourists during the day, in the cold morning hours, what is probably the most beautiful spot in the Atacama, is ours alone. Little paths and circuit tours lead through the salt pan which somehow seems to be inside out due to erosion and tectonics. Each turn offers new and totally different perspectives on rock formation the likes of which we have never seen before. We do not know which creator is ultimately responsible for everything, but he has definitely done a good job.

That brings us to the main reason of our journey; the stary sky. It already reaches its high one hour after sunset. Due to the fact that we have a new moon, the Milky Way takes over the job of illuminating the surrounding area. We take out the camping chairs, open a good bottle of red wine, marvel silently and conclude that our existence counts as nothing at all. Just imagine that if you wanted to drive through the galaxy by car and put the cruise control on at 100 kilometres per hour, the journey would take one million x one million years. Too far for our next road trip.

Unfortunately we are not able to arrange an appointment to visit the nearby ALMA European Southern Observatory. At an altitude of 5,200 metres, there are 66 single telescopes which can be connected together by a super computer into one giant telescope – currently the most powerful in the world. ALMA enables astronomers to carry out detailed researches on the fundamental building blocks of stars, planetary systems, galaxies and even life itself.

COUNTING STARS, DRINKING WINE

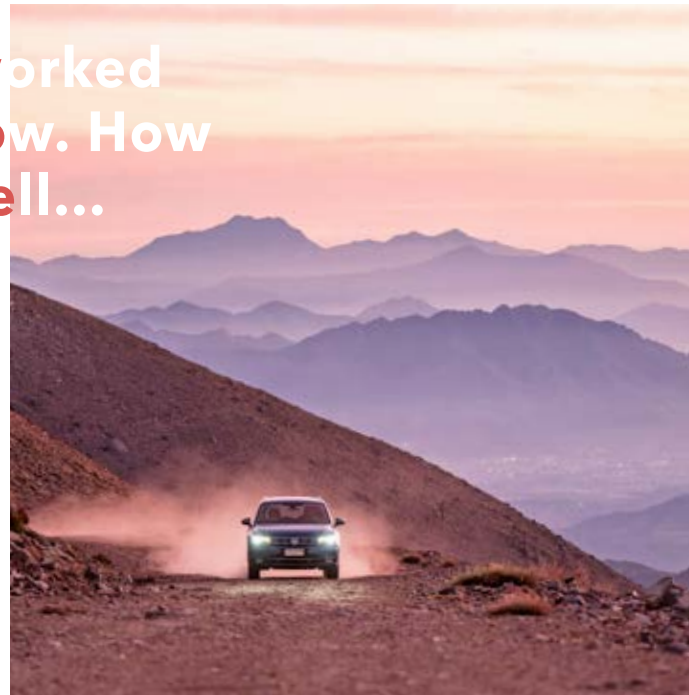
The Explora Lodge is unique like ALMA. We spent all the money we saved sleeping in the Allspace there. All at once. Located on the edge of the town of San Pedro, and hidden behind the thick clay walls, lies a refuge second to none which totally re-defines the all-inclusive strategy. Not only are three meals included but also wine to suit. That's a totally new experience for us as we are used to cooking our Pasta Rosso ourselves. The Explora concept has more to offer. The "exploration" is also included. There are free guided excursions every day. Whether it is a half-day visit to hot springs, horse riding through

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**When the sun sets,
the temperature
drops from 20
degrees plus
to minus 10.**

Toni, aged 83, has worked 106 ski seasons in a row. How did he do that? Well...



The drive to Ski Arpa is also an adventure for non-skiers.

the dunes or a twelve-hour ascent of the 5,918 metre high Licancabur, the Explora really makes every guest happy. Only the hot-air balloon tour which we do the next day is not included. It is still worth doing. And so with lots of hot air we fly across the Atacama and enjoy the sun rise. Isn't it a bit difficult to pick us up again in this pathless wilderness? Not really, says pilot Andy. The wind turns another direction with every hundred metres of altitude and thanks to information provided by those in the second balloon which set off with us, the balloons can be controlled by going up and down so that more or less you can actually arrive back at the starting point. And indeed, after two hours, we arrive as soft as butter on the gravel road, only 500 metres away from the starting point. After a fantastic week in Atacama, we drive back down south, our mouths open in amazement. Neither of us has ever seen such natural landscape on such a scale. We are not concerned about the 1,700 kilometres back because we know there is a lot to see.

SKIING IN JULY

There is one item left. Ever since the beginning of the trip, a ski bag has been travelling around with us in the Allspace. And we want to put the touring skis to the test now. Is there any other country where it is possible to combine summer and winter in one journey? For our winter excursion we turn left into the bush just before we hit Santiago to meet an old friend: Toni Sponar. The 83-year old emigrated after the Second World War from east Styria in Austria to Canada and just happened to become a ski instructor. The job lead him to the east coast

of the USA and later to Chile where he gave lessons in Portillo from July to September. At one point in the 1980s, he had the opportunity to buy two valleys in the shadow of the Aconcagua Mountain where today he still runs a little ski resort with his son. Toni can look back on an incredible 106 ski seasons in a row – without a break between them.

After we have managed to navigate the bumpy road to Ski Arpa, we look forward to a few ski tours and Toni's incredible stories. We cannot impress him with our 1,700 kilometre tour, because in the 1970s, he drove three times from Aspen in Colorado – still his main residence – to Chile in a VW van. Without a navi and Airbnb but with a surf board on the roof and three month's time.

So in case Volkswagen happens to ask again if we can just test a car, we have an idea in mind... <<



IT'S YOUR TURN: YOUR ROAD TRIP THROUGH CHILE

Getting there

Air France offers the best connection to Chile with a night flight from Paris. Depending on the feeder flight, you will be travelling for around 18 hours. It is recommended to book early as flights are fully booked.

Car rental

You can find suitable cars at autoeurope.de or billiger-mietwagen.de. It is not a bad idea to look for all-wheel drive and good ground clearance.

Accommodation

Everything is all possible – from camping wild in the desert, to inexpensive hostels to 5 star lodges. Find the

perfect overview on booking.com and book your overnight accommodation early the same day.

Country & people

Chile is a perfect travel country with neither poisonous animals nor tropical diseases. The Chileans are also very relaxed – just do not mention the Confed Cups ;) Take a look at the safety instructions issued by the Federal Foreign Office so you do not become a victim of crime.

Infos

www.chile.travell.de/, www.skiarpa.com,
www.explora.com, www.balloonsoveratacama.com

Eddie Bauer Guide (IFMGA) Adrian Ballinger
Tested on his seventh summit
of Mt. Everest, 2017



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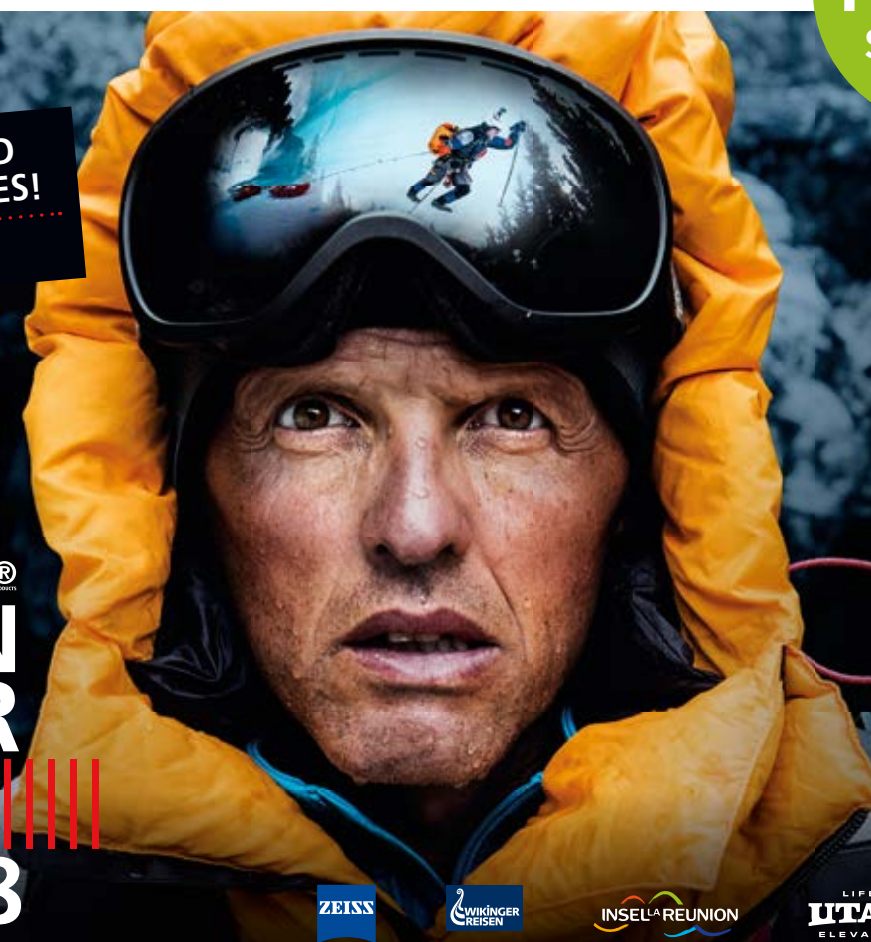
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