

Southern star CHILE

From the streets of Santiago to the Andes and wilds of Patagonia, **YVONNE GORDON** says tourism is booming in Chile

Long ago, explorers and navigators believed the earth was flat and thought there were monsters at the bottom of the world — *patagóns*,” says Rodrigo Hernández. We’re nearly at the bottom of the world ourselves, bumping along some unpaved roads where Rodrigo, a local guide, is introducing me to Patagonia, a region shared by Chile and Argentina.

Apparently the Portuguese explorer Ferdinand Magellan named the land here after a mythical race of people said to be up to 15 feet high. There aren’t any signs of them now — in fact, there are very few people at all. The province we’re in, Aysén, is Chile’s fifth largest but there’s just one person for every 1.5 square miles. The name Aysén comes from ‘ice end’ — referring to the icy end of the world.

To get there, we flew into Balmaceda airport in Northern Patagonia — about three-quarters of the way down Chile’s 4,300km length. I immediately felt small in the vast landscape, a wide, open expanse edged by the dark blue Andes with their frozen white peaks. The road from

the airport was long and straight; brown and black cows grazed in scrubby green fields. We passed the town of Coyhaique, the wooden houses with their smoking chimneys and pick-up trucks outside fading away as we drove north.

It’s the Patagonia I imagined, but there were other things about Chile I didn’t know how to imagine. Landing in Santiago three days before, I didn’t know whether to expect beauty or grime, calm or chaos, mansions or shanty towns. The capital city turned out to have them all, and it was busy. Its five million people all seemed to be walking in the city centre. As I joined them, I tried to figure Santiago out. Some of the streets reminded me of North America, until I’d notice a stall selling rows of coloured shoelaces. Or a cart on a street corner selling *mote con huesillo* — a popular drink made from dried peaches and cooked husked wheat. Its cloudy, pale yellow colour doesn’t make it look very appealing, but it’s very refreshing.

I saw Plaza De Armas, the square at the heart of the city, and admired the ornate Metropolitan cathedral. I saw the crypt of the man who liberated Chile from

the Spaniards in 1810 and whose name is everywhere, from streets to glaciers. Bernardo O’Higgins. His dad was from County Sligo.

Santiago was nice, but a glimpse high into the sky reminded me of what I had really come to see. There, almost indistinguishable from the clouds, were the mysterious white peaks of the Andes — which reach up to 22,500 feet high here. I remembered that a land of volcanoes, lakes and glaciers awaited to the south. I just hoped there would be no monsters.

In Chilean Patagonia, we hiked to a hanging glacier in Quelat National Park. We walked through the Enchanted Forest — so named because of the otherworldly tree formations, all covered in a thick green moss. We saw an ice-filled lagoon and, along the way, Rodrigo told us about everything from the names of the trees to the customs of the native Chilean Mapuche tribe. At night, we stayed in a lodge (puyuhuapilodge.com) on the edge of a fjord, admired the star-filled skies from the hot springs, and took in the clean air and clean water.

Chile is booming. This year, tourism

New heights: The mountains in Chile (left) are awe-inspiring; capital city Santiago



is up 20pc on 2014. Having been ruled by the dictator General Pinochet for 17 years until 1990, the country is now one of South America’s most stable. It’s considered safe to travel there, new hotels are opening up, roads are being paved. The government has announced a \$100m investment in tourism for next year, creating everything from thousands of kilometres of trails to cycleways, camping zones and marine protection areas.

Chile is home to the Atacama Desert, the Pacific Ocean and magnificent glaciers such as in Torres del Paine in the south. Of course, it also has earthquakes and volcanoes — though many would say it is well prepared. Fatalities from an 8.3-magnitude quake and tsunami in September totalled just 14.

In the Lake District in Puerto Varas, two big volcanoes look over

LLanquihue Lake. Osorno, with its classic conical shape capped with snow, is popular for hiking, climbing and skiing. Its noisy neighbour, Calubuco, erupted in April. The eruption lasted an hour and a half and though there was a lot of ash, no injuries were reported. Within a month, tourist activity was back to normal. The number of outdoor clothing shops in the small town indicate the main visitor activities — hiking, climbing, skiing, fishing and horse riding.

The last day of my adventure was on Chiloé Island, in the middle of Chile. The green bumpy fields of sheep, the telegraph wires, the yellow gorse along the road, the grey clouds, were all exactly like Ireland. Charles Darwin wrote that Chiloé reminded him of England. Apparently it rains up to 300 days a year on the island, where bartering is big and the main currencies are, guess what — salmon and potatoes. That’s the funny thing about travel to faraway places. You go all the way to the bottom of the world and you worry there might be monsters, but then it turns out that parts are just like home...

WHAT TO PACK

Climates will vary depending on whether you’re going north to the desert or south to the mountains. The further south, the colder it gets, so pack warm layers for outdoor activities and have hiking boots that fit — outdoor specialists like Great Outdoors have a hiking boot fitting service.

3 must-dos...



TORRES DEL PAINE NATIONAL PARK

Trek through spectacular scenery in Southern Patagonia, and see the Glacier Grey, lakes of icebergs, forests, waterfalls and the distinctive granite peaks of the Paine massif. You can also see the park by horseback, and there are circuits for experienced climbers. See torresdelpaine.com.



CENTRAL VALLEY

Set between the Andes and the Coastal Mountains, the fertile Central Valley plains are home to Chile’s main wine region, with plenty of opportunities for visits and wine tastings. The main wine routes are Aconcagua, Casablanca, San Antonio-Leyda, Maipo, Cachapoal, Curico and Maule Valleys.



ATACAMA DESERT

This 600-mile strip of land in northern Chile is one of the driest places on the planet. Base yourself in San Pedro de Atacama and organise day trips to Valle de la Luna (Valley of the Moon), Death Valley, the huge salt flats and the El Tatio geysers, which come alive just after sunrise. See chile.travel.



GETTING THERE

Return flights from Dublin to Santiago are available via Amsterdam or Paris with KLM / Air France (airfrance.ie, klm.com) and via Madrid with Iberia (iberia.com). You can also fly via London or the USA but there will be more than one stopover. For more information, see chile.travel.



HOW TO DO IT

South American travel specialists Nuevo Mundo (nuevomundo.ie) have a 14-day trip visiting Santiago, the Central Valley winelands, Lake District and Torres del Paine national park, including all flights, transfers, accommodation and select excursions from €3,195pp plus taxes.

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