

Saturday, December 13, 2025

The West Australian travel

A WORLD OF EXPERIENCE

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24 PAGES
TO PULL OUT

**LESSONS IN
CULTURE & CUISINE
IN CHILE**

**'You give,
then you
receive'**

A CAPTAIN'S LIFE AT SEA, IN THE WAKE OF EXPLORERS

CHILE



Vast desert teems with life & culture

SUZANNE MORPHET finds time and trust is an important offering

If I told you that on my last trip I tasted olive tapenade, smelled orange blossoms, visited an oregano farm, and drank a delicious red wine, you'd probably think I visited the Mediterranean region.

It would be a good guess, but you'd be wrong.

I went to Chile's Atacama Desert, the driest non-polar desert

in the world. It's so dry some of the oldest mummies in the world have been discovered there, their bodies still preserved 7000 years later.

Yet even in this desert, there's life and culture, if you know where to look.

My week-long road trip with

Trekking Aymara, a local Indigenous tour operator, would take me and two other guests from sea-level to the very top of one of the country's most colourful volcanoes at 5300m. Between stops,



we'd meet some of the people who thrive in this desert and we'd walk through some of the most stunning landscapes you can imagine.

Arriving in Arica, we learn this coastal city holds the world record for the longest period without any measurable rain — 14 years — from October 1903-January 1918.

"It never rains here," confirms our guide Santiago Tamani as we stand on the clifftop that Chilean soldiers seized from Peru in the 19th-century War of the Pacific. The city spread below is a blur of mostly beige and brown.

Just a few kilometres away, the Azapa Valley is a shocking contrast. The lush green corridor is chock-a-block with small farms, greenhouses and orchards. A river brings water from the Andes in summer and fills underground wells. This is where Ignacio Sanhueza hands me a sprig of fragrant white orange blossoms, then leads us through his family's commercial orchard of almost 300 olive trees.

Spanish colonisers planted the first olive trees to provide oil to fuel church lanterns and to light silver mines. The oldest tree here at Bezma was planted around 1579. It's still producing, and is on La Ruta de los Olivos Centenarios, a trail linking and celebrating Chile's heritage olive trees.

The Azapa Valley is also home to the San Miguel de Azapa Archaeological Museum, with its fascinating displays of Chinchorro mummies; human bodies from an



ancient culture, some naturally mummified in the bone-dry ground, others carefully prepared for preservation. I could spend hours here, but there's more living culture in this enormous desert waiting for us to experience.

In the village of Codpa, almost 2000m above sea level, Ayde Montesinos welcomes us into her wine-tasting room and pours glasses of ruby-red pintatani. It's a sweet wine she makes from grapes introduced by Spanish priests more than 400 years ago. "Only men stomp the grapes," says Santiago, interpreting for Ayde, an indigenous Aymara woman.

Raising our glasses, we learn to say "jallalla" — pronounced



Clockwise from top, Lauca National Park. Pet llamas. Suripaza Rainbow Mountain. Conrado Blanco and pet llamas. Conrado Blanco, left, and Alvaro Mamani. Adelaida Marca Gutierrez. Pictures: Suzanne Morphet



Ignacio Sanhueza and the oldest olive tree on his farm, planted around 1579.

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ha-YA-ya. "It's what friends say to each other, meaning 'in a good time'," says Santiago, and by now the five of us are, indeed, friends.

A couple of days later and 1100m higher, we stop to visit another Aymara woman. Adelaida Marca Gutierrez grows and sells oregano in Socoroma — the third generation of her family to do so. Near her one-hectare plot of land, a man-made channel brings water to farmers, a centuries-old tradition that still surprises her.

"The wisdom of carrying water from the rivers to the hills without being professionals, right?" she says.

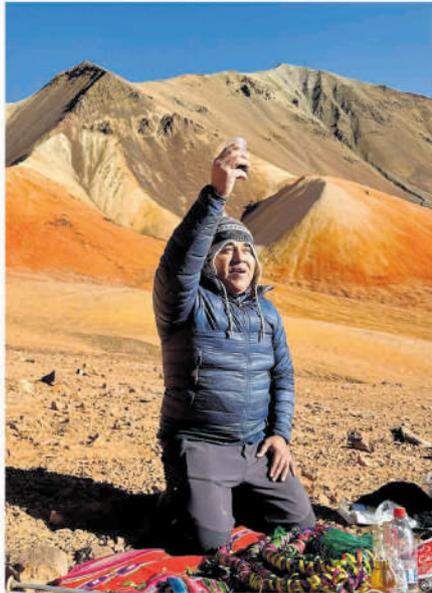
Early the next morning we leave our hotel in Putre in time to have breakfast with an Aymara herder at his estancia. Speeding along a dirt road with no one else in sight, we stop en route to photograph an apacheta — a stone cairn that marks an ancient caravan route through the Andes.

This windswept plateau — the altiplano — is where Conrado Blanco lives with his wife, two friendly dogs, 200 llamas, and 70 alpacas. Over a breakfast of coffee, eggs, avocados and alpaca meat, we learn he is 79 but has no plans to retire. His two university-educated children have good jobs in Arica and little interest in the lonely business of raising animals.

Bidding Conrado goodbye, we jump back in the van to drive to Lauca National Park. At Chungara Lake, one of the highest lakes in the world at 4500m, calm water reflects the perfect cone of Parinacota, a dormant snow-capped volcano on Chile's border with Bolivia.

In the foreground, just metres from where we stand in awe, a couple of dozen vicunas graze peacefully, while a couple of Andean geese sit together, partnered for life.

A 10km hike around the



Trekking Aymara owner Alvaro Mamani performs a Pawa, a traditional Aymara ceremony to thank Mother Earth.

Cotacotani Lagoons reveals numerous islands and islets separated by volcanic rock and surrounded by bofedales, the wetlands of the Andes.

Even though we've mostly acclimatised to the thin air, Santiago tells us: "Don't talk, just walk." That night, back in Putre, we soak at the local thermal hot springs under a star-speckled sky and count our lucky ones.

On our last morning, just as I'm thinking it can't get any better, it does. What look like rivers of gold, silver and bronze flow down the sides of the Suriplaza Rainbow Mountains under a cobalt-blue sky.

We reach the end of the dirt road and start to climb, first to a plateau, where Alvaro Mamani — the owner of Trekking Aymara — performs a Pawa. It's an Aymara ceremony to thank Pachamama — Mother Earth — with food and drink.

"You make an offer," Santiago explained earlier. "So, you give, and then you receive. Reciprocity always."

Afterwards, I take my time hiking to the summit, not just because it's harder to breathe up here, but because I want to memorise every detail — the silence, the sharp stones underfoot, the half-moon hanging in the sky, the otherworldly colours, Alvaro's heartwarming Pawa.

We're a bit like the Aymara, I



Climbing the Suriplaza Rainbow Mountains at more than 5000m above sea level.

fact file

■ Trekking Aymara Indigenous Outdoor offers tours throughout the region of Arica and Parinacota in northern Chile. Its small-group, multi-day packages include private transportation, an English-speaking guide, hotel, meals and, if camping, tents and other gear. Rates vary with the itinerary.
■ trekkingaymara.cl/en/home/

think when I reach the top. Instead of food and drink, our offerings are time and trust. We gave our time to come to this remote region and put our trust in Trekking Aymara to keep us safe.

In return, we've received the priceless gifts of awe and wonder, friendship and camaraderie.

Suzanne Morphet was a guest of Trekking Aymara and the Adventure Travel Trade Association. They have not influenced this story, or read it before publication.



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