

Paying the EARTH

In Chile's northern Atacama Desert, a guided trek reveals an Indigenous ritual, high-altitude wilderness, and a rare sense of solitude

BY SUZANNE MORPHET

Alvaro Mamani kneels on a blanket and carefully arranges his offerings; two bottles of beer, a tetrapak of red wine, a handful of coca leaves and a colourful paper chain. Raising a glass of wine to the sky, he begins his *pawa*, the Indigenous Aymara ceremony of making an offering to the land known as *pago a la tierra u ofrenda*.

Alvaro, the owner of Trekking Aymara, is leading three of us on a week-long journey through Chile's northern Atacama Desert, one of the driest places on Earth, and among its most visually arresting.

Here, on the slope of a vividly streaked volcano, honouring Pachamama—Mother Earth—is an act of respect before hiking. "Reciprocity always," explains Santiago Tamani, Alvaro's English-speaking guide. "You give and then you receive."

GUARDIANS OF THE DESERT

We begin in the coastal city of Arica. Rising abruptly from the sand are monumental concrete sculptures by Chilean artist Juan Díaz Fleming. *Presencias Tutelares*, or Guardian Spirits, honours Aymara ancestors and deities. Further along, hundreds of small stone cairns stretch toward the horizon. This is the Valley of the Apachetas, named for the larger cairns ancient traders built to mark caravan routes across the desert.

ACCLIMATIZING TO THE ALTITUDE

The Atacama Desert is anything but homogeneous. The road winds through cacti-studded hillsides, drifting sand dunes, windswept plateaus, and deep



DESERT OLIVES, LASTING LEGACY
Olive trees are rarely associated with deserts, but in the Azapa Valley near Arica, trees introduced by Spanish colonizers nearly 500 years ago still produce oil. Tours with Trekking Aymara can include visits and tastings.



DID YOU KNOW?
The world's largest telescope, the Extremely Large Telescope, is under construction in the Atacama Desert. Its exceptionally dry air and dark skies make the region a global hub for astronomers.



PHOTOS: PULSE FILMS / SUZANNE MORPHET

canyons carrying precious meltwater from the Andes. We stop in small villages with beautifully preserved colonial-era churches and meet Indigenous women cultivating oregano and grapes.

Each day brings more altitude and less oxygen. By day four, our bodies have adjusted enough to venture higher, and we are ready to experience the most scenic of landscapes yet.

LAUCA NATIONAL PARK — A WORLD BIOSPHERE RESERVE

We leave the village of Putre before sunrise, stopping for breakfast with a 79-year-old llama herder before continuing into Lauca National Park. The first view stops us cold.

Parínacota volcano rises majestically above Chungará Lake, its snow-covered cone reflected in the still water. In the foreground, vicuñas—the wild ancestors of alpacas—graze calmly in a spongy wetland, while ducks dot the lake. More volcanoes line the far shore, filling the horizon with grandeur.

Though Lauca lies within the Atacama Desert, it receives seasonal rains between December and February. That water replenishes the salty lagoons and nourishes plants such as the strange-looking *llareta*, which grows atop boulders to resemble cushions, but is so dense it's as hard as the rock beneath.

A PARK WITHOUT PEOPLE

Perhaps most astounding, is its emptiness. On a ten-kilometre trek along mostly flat trails, we encounter no one else. Viscachas—rabbit-like rodents—sunbathe on boulders, while water birds patrol the wetlands. When a flock of flamingos lifts off before us their wings flash crimson as they turn in perfect unison, searing the moment into memory.

The park can be busy from June through August, Santiago explains, when European travellers arrive. But winter at this altitude is brutally cold. In October, we enjoy daytime temperatures in the low to mid-teens Celsius, and extraordinary solitude.

SUMMITTING SURIPLAZA

The Suriplaza Rainbow Mountains could be on a different planet. It's here, on one of the ancient volcanoes, that Alvaro makes his *pawa*. Afterwards, I take my time climbing to the rim so I can absorb every detail; the ethereal colours, the razor-sharp stones underfoot, the cobalt blue sky, the absolute stillness and quiet.

At the summit, a breathtaking 5,300 metres above sea level, I make my own quiet *pawa*. Giving thanks to Pachamama, I feel a final surge of awe and humility, keenly aware that in this vast landscape, humans are merely visitors and I'm privileged to be one of the few. **DS**

TRAVEL PLANNER

To explore Chile's northern Atacama Desert with Trekking Aymara, visit trekkingaymara.cl/en/home