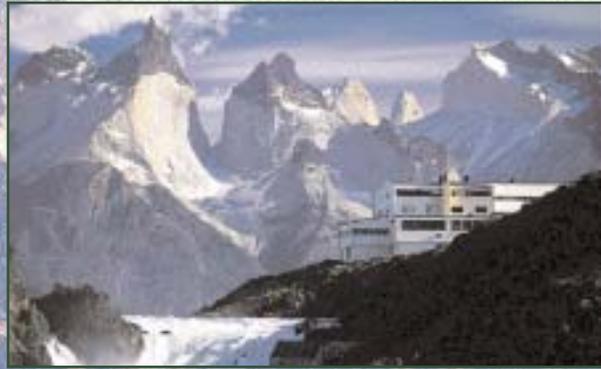


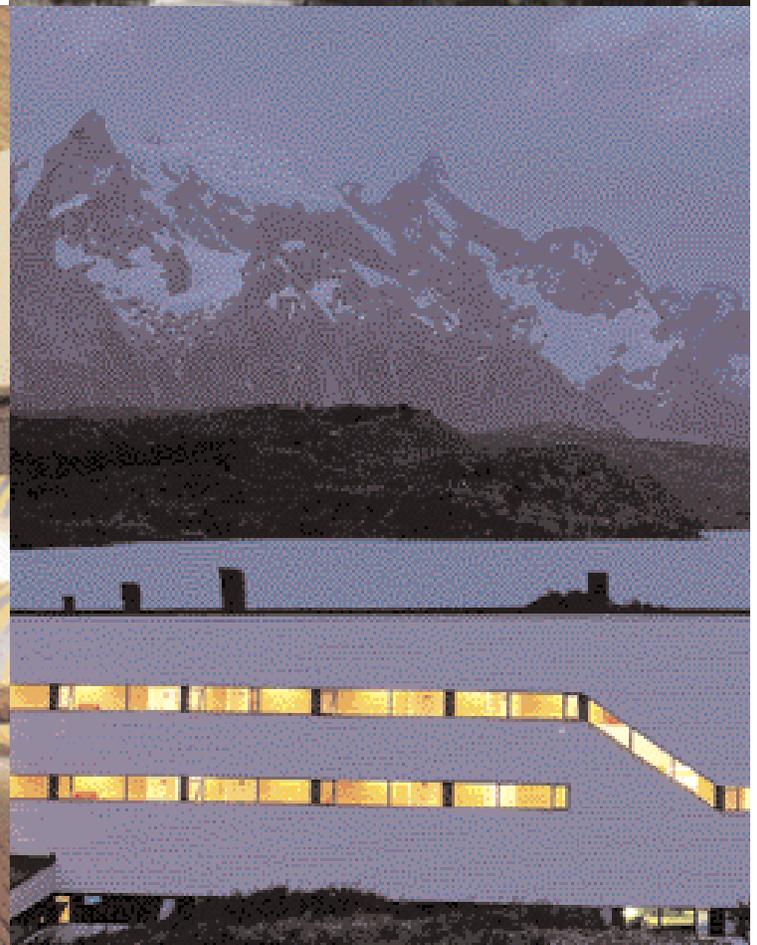
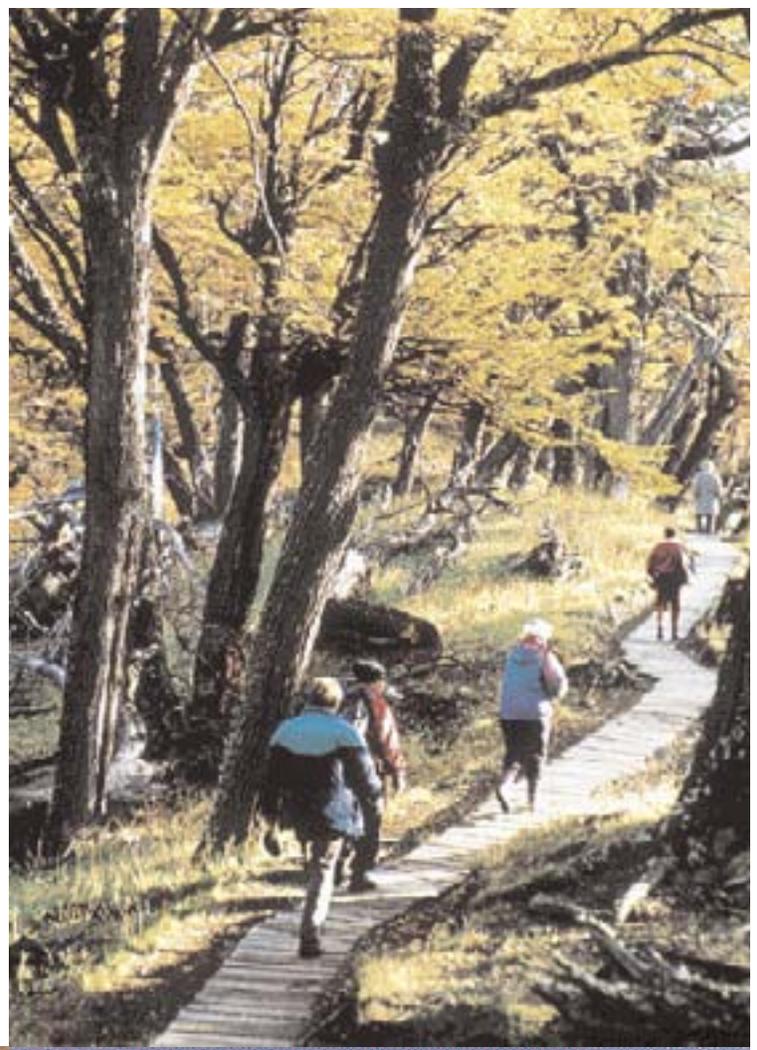
Extreme Adventure

The Andes Mountains set the perfect backdrop for Lago Pehoe. ...



Exploring two of Chile's most unique wilderness sanctuaries that take travelers to the back of beyond.

By Judy Alexandra DiEdwardo





This Page: Licancbur Volcano. **Opposite page clockwise:** Outdoor hot tub at Lago Pehoe. Hiking trips provide up-close looks at nature. Lago Pehoe at night. Awe-inspiring landscapes can be seen from every room at the Lago Pehoe.

The snow-capped peaks of the Andes Mountains come into view as my flight descends through a thick sheet of clouds on an overnight flight to the heart of Patagonia in southern Chile. Chock-full of cascading waterfalls, sprawling glaciers and lush, dense forests, the region's 600,000-acre Torres del Paine National Park is like Alaska on steroids.

Its hallmark trio of 10,000-foot-high blue granite spires loom in the distance as an ever present reminder that I'm not in Kansas anymore. I am less than 100 miles from the continent's southernmost landmark known geographically as the end of the earth.

This is the first half of a 10-day naturalist's expedition to the geographical opposites of this stringbean-shaped country that forms South America's western coastline. My journey will culminate in a landscape that's equally majestic amid boiling geysers and simmering volcanoes in the high altitude desert of northern Chile. But for now, I am at Chile's southernmost point just a stone's throw from Antarctica where the springtime air is crisp and cold. The massive glaciers of the Patagonian ice field have begun melting into a maze of pale indigo blue lakes as the Southern Hemisphere awakens from its long winter slumber.

Until a decade ago, comfortable travel to this remote outer landscape was only possible for those willing (or able) to endure the rigors of week-long hikes under sparse conditions. But thanks to nature-loving Chilean Pedro Ibanéz, who is as passionate about adventure in his native country as he is creature comforts, luxury exploration is only a few airplane tickets away. Built along the pristine shores of Lago Pehoe, Patagonia's cozy 30-room Explora Resort is a welcome wilderness respite from the elements and a humbling vantage point for viewing the surrounding granite massifs that began their vertical ascent from sea level more than 12 million years ago. Topflight service, stellar expeditions, outdoor

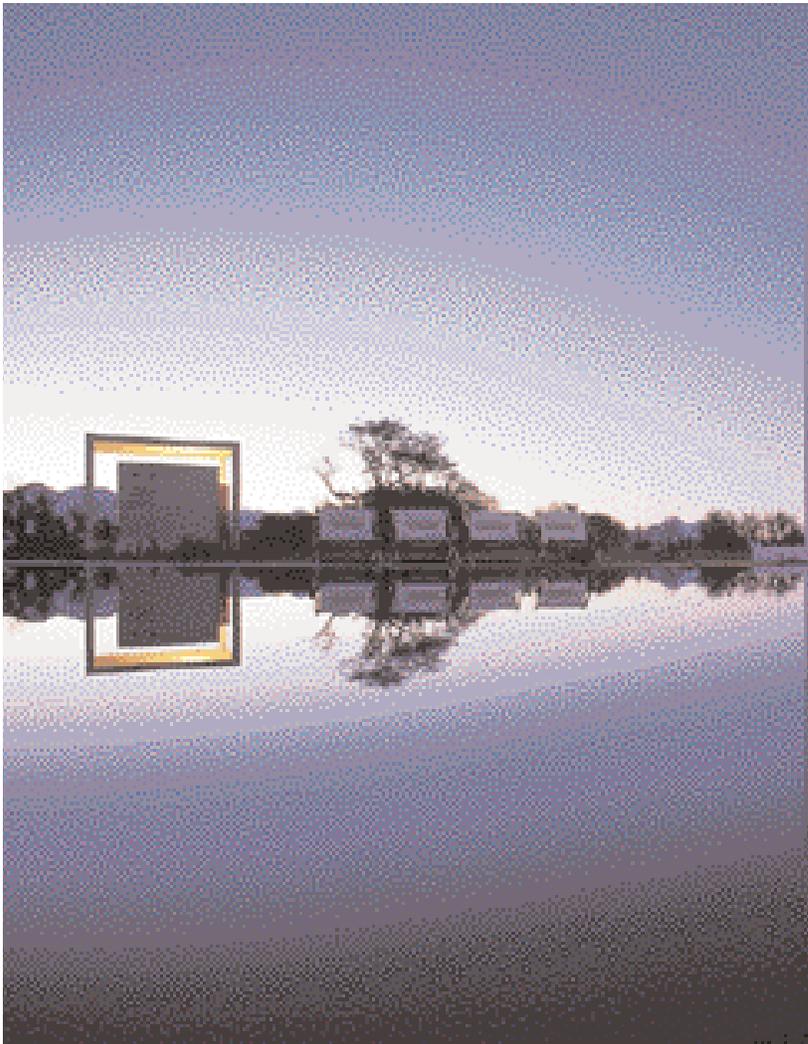
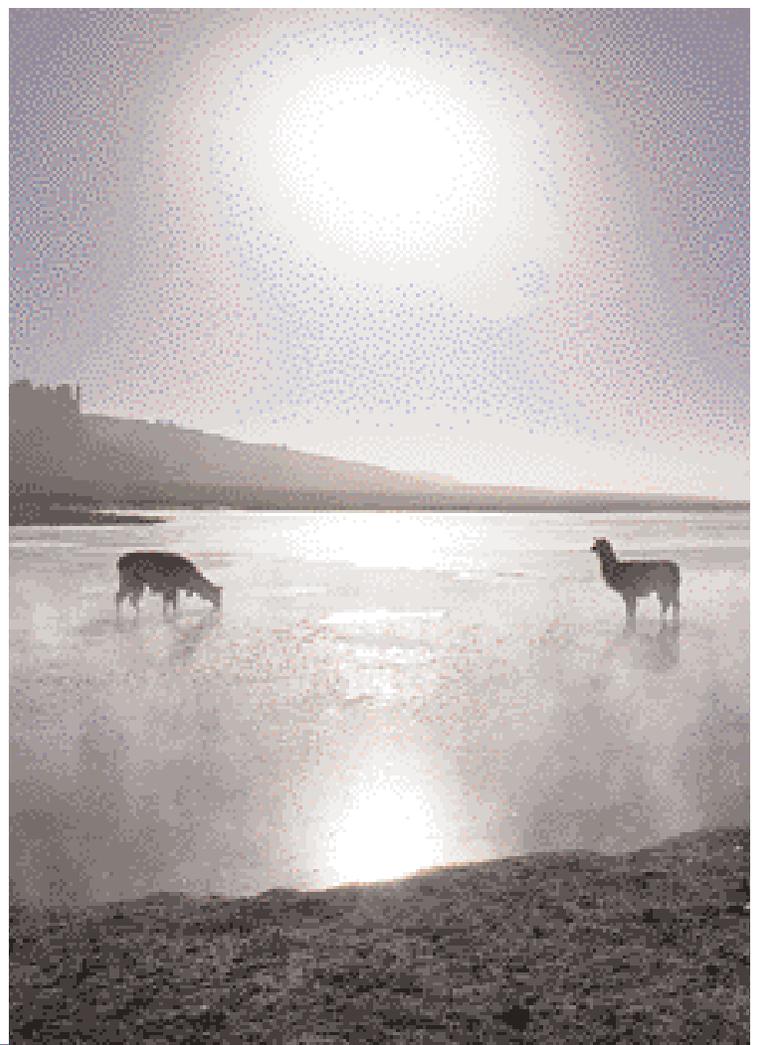
jacuzzis, gourmet cuisine — no wonder why even ardent backpackers are trading in their rucksacks for a few nights at Explora.

Guests choose from five daily itineraries that are staffed by a fleet of Olympian-caliber guides and range from relatively easy hikes along the impressive Salto Chico Waterfall where the roar of this powerful river is deafening, to a challenging day-long trek to the base of the park's signature blue granite towers. Each itinerary offers its share of wildlife sightings, including more than 150 species of birds and the ubiquitous llama-like guanacos.

Traveling through this relatively unexplored region of South America's southern outback is an outdoor adventurer's nirvana and well worth the long, arduous trip. From Miami, it's eight hours to Santiago, followed by a five-hour flight to Punta Arenas and then a six-hour drive 250 miles north to the boundaries of Torres del Paine. Add another few hours for layovers and you get the idea. But it's doubtful you'd ever regret the down-time since you'll need to be well rested for the days of hiking, motorboating and horseback riding that await. In fact, Explora encourages total physical immersion in this amazing biosphere — not just gazing at its mountain peaks from your bathtub, which is a real possibility.

My excitement over traveling to this gale-swept land of mystery and lore is tempered by a geographical reality: Patagonia is a vast territory that covers the southern half of Argentina and Chile and cannot be possibly explored in one visit. That being said, this isn't a bad place to begin.

Upon my afternoon arrival I chose a refreshing two-mile hike in the 40-degree air along the gentle banks of Lago Grey. The lake was formed by the frigid runoff from the 17-mile long Ventisquero Grey glacier, one of four major glaciers in the Rio Serrano basin. Throughout my stay I enjoyed several other itin-





This Page: Sunset in the Andes Mountains. Opposite page clockwise: Guanacos. The Atacama desert is the world's driest and reaches 8,000-feet above sea level. Many lakes are left behind by glaciers that plow through Patagonia. The Explora Atacama Compound.

eraries that were equally stunning, but passed on the day-long treks and mountain horseback riding, which is recommended for seasoned riders only.

All too soon it was time to leave my wilderness oasis and shed my winter clothes to visit Explora's sister property in Chile's northern Atacama Desert — the world's driest. Located 8,000 feet above sea level near the Bolivian border, the 42-acre Explora Atacama Compound sits at the edge of a village that for centuries has played host to the continent's pre-Columbian Andean cultures. Moreover, it is the ideal outpost for exploration of Atacama's vast desert region that is nothing short of spectacular: 20,000-foot-high volcanoes, steaming hot geysers, colossal sand dunes, shimmering salt lagoons and gleaming mineral springs are set against the backdrop of the Andean Mountains.

In 1998, Explora's Ibanéz enlisted his architect to create an adobe compound of 52 guest quarters that were built in concert with the local terrain. The rooms line a U-shaped courtyard and feature cool stone floors, rich stucco walls, sumptuous native Chilean fabrics and furniture — and a bird's eye view of the distant smoldering Licancbur Volcano. Bathrooms reflect the Explora tradition of pampering and feature oversized whirlpool tubs equipped with shower heads that measure over a foot in diameter.

But as with Explora's Patagonian outpost, the real treasures here are to be found in the surrounding desert and mountains. One of the most thrilling adventures began at 4 a.m. with a 90-minute jeep ride that climbed 14,000 feet to the El Tatio geysers, the world's highest. Once there, I walked across the lunar-like plateau amid dozens of sizzling, bubbling geysers, their white hot plumes of steam melting into the cold morning air. With each step, I grew in awe over the primitive beauty of the landscape and

the mysteries of the simmering cauldron of earth beneath me.

A short sunset hike took me through winding, wind-whipped desert canyons to the pointed crest of the Las Cornisas Mountains that overlook the vast craters and flats of the Valle de Luna. The setting sun transformed the mountains into a brilliant array of color and shadow. The landscapes here are otherworldly. It's little wonder why NASA uses this high desert terrain to test their equipment for planetary exploration.

The most challenging of all excursions, and one that is reserved for those who are very fit, is a heart-pounding hike up the side of the area's most amazing volcanoes. The trek to Volcán Lascar begins with a four-hour ride to an altitude of 15,400 feet. That's the easy part. From there, the thinning air makes for a slow and steady hike up to 18,000 feet where one of the world's most exhilarating views awaits. Overlooking the vast Andean range from such a magnificent vantage point I contemplated the rare and treasured experiences that I had been afforded throughout my Chilean adventure. And I realized why Pedro Ibanéz couldn't wait to bring me here.

GETTING THERE *There are regular non-stop flights from Miami to Santiago on American Airlines, as well as daily flights aboard LanChile from Santiago to Punta Arenas in the south and Santiago to Calama in the north.*

WHEN TO GO *In Patagonia, October-December is the best time to visit when daytime temperatures average in the 50s. In the Atacama, November-January is ideal. From January-March temperatures climb to 100 degrees, though the dryness of the climate makes even high temperatures bearable.*

PRICES (BOTH LOCATIONS) *Rates start at \$2,000/person per week and include meals, drinks and guided trips. For reservations and information log on to www.explora.com. ❖*