

Crossing Into Chile: Desert, Altitude, and Where Llamas Roam Mars

After leaving Nazca or Nasca, we stopped for the night in a small coastal town in Peru, Camaná. We needed to break up the drive and do a little work. We were ready for a new frontier.



The next morning, we began heading south toward Chile, and the drive immediately became something extraordinary. The road curved endlessly through dry desert landscapes painted in deep reds and dusty browns, jagged and raw. To our right, the Pacific stretched out in a vast, uninterrupted blue. From the cliffs, the ocean felt impossibly far below, the kind of dramatic drop you usually only see in movies, like those winding Mediterranean coastal drives with a convertible, except that we had our Taco Libre, nothing even close to a sporty convertible! Now that we think about it, that drive in Chikito, our Miata, would have been spectacular!

As the sun began to set, the contrast intensified. Rugged desert mountains glowing against the wide blue sky above, and the ocean reflecting it all below. It was truly an unforgettable drive.

Crossing into Chile, the change was immediate. The roads were clean. No trash. No honking. Drivers moved calmly and politely, which we both noticed and greatly appreciated. The border crossing itself took longer than others we had experienced. This time, officials thoroughly checked the car, making sure nothing crossed with us that shouldn't. It was more involved, but smooth, and we had no issues at all.



We spent the night in Arica, easing into Chile with a simple but satisfying meal and a walk through the downtown area, which was dressed in Christmas lights and decorations. There was something calm about it until we found the party street, which was very much alive with music.



The next day, we turned inland and began our journey toward the Atacama Desert. Our first stop was Putre. Putre is a small, quiet, and remote town. The cobblestone streets, narrow roads, and emptiness give the unmistakable sense that you are far from everything. It wasn't just a feeling; we truly were away from even the most obvious commodities that we take for granted: GAS! There were no gas stations in Putre, or even within a few miles of the town. None. Thankfully, we had brought an extra gas can, which turned out to be essential. Gas can be purchased privately through small hotels or local shops, for a higher price, of course, but you would never know where without asking. We relied on the iOverlander and a helpful restaurant waiter, who, over a plate of alpaca, pointed us in the right direction. With a full tank, we felt ready. The alpaca? It tasted like lamb, just a little tougher.

At Putre, we stayed in a small cabin. We were not ready to camp – we were at 11,500 feet, which was quite an elevation gain in one day, and at night it was very cold, close to freezing temperature. We decided we'd better get acclimated by staying at the cabin for one night and then embrace adventure while wild camping. We had some coca tea and spent a calm night at a cabin that was named after one of the first mountains we were planning to see in Chile: Parícuta.



The following day, while driving la Ruta del Desierto, or the Desert Route, we explored the Lauca–Chungará circuit. To truly understand what that day felt like, we suggest you watch our YouTube video included at the bottom of this e-mail. We equate the experience as being in Mars and the Moon and sometimes in both at the same time. The red colors of the desert mountains are something out of this world. We saw llamas, alpacas, and vicuñas roaming freely across vast plains. The wide open and silent terrains made the experience surreal.



We also discovered a new creature altogether: the vizcacha, a cute type of rabbit, just a bit bigger and wilder.

That night, we planned to camp, but the altitude had other plans. The elevation hit us harder than expected. We listened to ourselves, our bodies, and chose comfort over stubbornness, returning to the cabin for another night.

The next day, we explored a different area in the desert route, the Circuito de las Quebradas, the circuit of creeks. Again, we documented it on YouTube (link below) but two moments stood out vividly: Seeing a condor in flight, massive and effortless against the sky, and visiting Salar de Surire, where the vastness of the salt flat added another layer to the already unreal landscape. At the salar we enjoyed the natural hot springs next to flamingos. It was also at this moment that we appreciated how well-equipped TL is! The hot springs are fantastic to relax, but the smell is not very comforting. The strong odor of sulfate is not something to take home, but luckily, we had a shower to rinse off the smell, and

may we say, the flamingo goodies left in the natural pool. But can you imagine a cold shower in the already cold air? Again, TL came to the rescue, not only with a shower, but with a nice and soothing hot shower.



After Putre, we began heading toward Iquique, a coastal town. To break up the long drive, especially after so many stops and slow desert exploration, we spent the night in a small town along the way. It happened to be a Sunday, election day in Chile. When we checked into the hotel, the man behind the desk handed us the key and, without hesitation, said, “We have a new president.” We were surprised by how casually it was offered to two travelers passing through. Curious, we asked if that was good news. He nodded and said it was, adding simply that communism was not good. It was a brief exchange, but one that reminded us how politics, even on quiet desert nights, can feel deeply personal.

From there, we continued on to Iquique. Before reaching the city, we stopped at the Gigante de Atacama. Standing before the ancient geoglyph, carved into the desert hillside, we were reminded of how long humans have been leaving marks that outlast generations. We left a small mark of our own...



The figure looms silently, watching over the desert, a reminder that this region has always been more than empty space. In fact, this region is full of ghost towns that carry on the memories of once a mining region or “oficinas” yes, an office in this region is synonymous with mining factories of saltpeter a.k.a. nitrate.

We stayed in Iquique for a few days. A coastal city where the desert meets the sea, with paragliders floating above and the Pacific. One of our stops was Cerro del Dragón. According to local legend, the dragon was given a potion to put him to sleep, with the promise that he would not be killed. In exchange, he would remain there as a guardian of nature, only to be awakened if the land was ever disturbed.



We took advantage of the small Airbnb in Iquique to have some homecooked meals and even freeze some for the road. We strolled down to the market and bought fresh clams, mussels and fish. We also tried lapas or limpit, a shellfish, which can be described as a mix between clams and snail.

So far Chile has been a wild experience and full of surprises. Undoubtedly, this is just the beginning.

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