

Between Ocean, Desert, and Unexpected Company

We left Iquique knowing we were still deep in the desert. The Atacama doesn't start or end in any clear way. It simply shifts as you move through it and is with you whether on the coast or inland.



Not far from Iquique, we found a place called Guanillos. Along the coast, between the ocean and the desert, we camped near an old castle that watches over the shoreline. That night, we went to sleep with the sound of the sea and woke up accompanied by sea lions who were ready to get their day started, way tooooooo early for our taste.

We shared that experience and the story of Castillo de Guanillos in a YouTube video, mainly because some places deserve more than a passing mention, and the views cannot be captured with a simple photograph.

After a few days of camping on the beach, including one day when our camping companions were fin whales – during the afternoon, while having dinner and in the morning – also captured in a YouTube video, we turned inland toward San Pedro de Atacama, where we planned to spend Christmas. There were so many places we wanted to explore that we decided to stay a few days put and let the desert continue to absorb our curiosity.

San Pedro felt different from many of the places we had visited so far in Chile. Very touristy and more international. The streets were full of travelers, mostly from Europe, with a few Americans mixed in, and many Brazilians.

It was another great opportunity for Mafe to practice her French. It felt like a small international hub right in the middle of the desert. Although the town was busy, the sites were never crowded. It speaks to the vastness of the Atacama desert.



We stayed at a small place run by a local Indigenous woman originally from Piedras Rojas. She told us how San Pedro changed over the years. According to her, about twenty years ago, a man arrived with a vision of turning the town into a luxury destination. He wanted to build a five-star hotel. The local community, especially the indigenous people, or Atacameños, opposed it strongly. But money and power tend to have their way, and eventually the hotel was built. After that, Airbnbs and hostels began to multiply, and San Pedro slowly transformed into the tourist destination it is today.

What was interesting to us most was how the local communities responded. Rather than continuing to fight the change, the Atacameños chose to protect their sites. Many of the places we visited and featured in our San Pedro de Atacama YouTube video, are not managed by the Chilean government but by the local Indigenous communities.

On Christmas Eve, before sunrise, we lifted quietly into the sky in a hot air balloon, as the desert began to glow below us. A dream we had shared for years and was awaiting to become reality. The colors in the sky shifted minute by minute: from dark skies to soft pinks and yellows to clear blue skies. Watching the sun rise over the desert from above felt unreal. We could see from high above the indigenous plats of land and the imposing Licancabur volcano.



That evening, we shared a delicious Chilean Christmas Eve meal. On Christmas Day, we slowed everything down, walked through town, wandered the streets, and stopped in the main square to watch the local Indigenous people dance and celebrate.

We left San Pedro and began heading southwest toward Pan de Azúcar, located on the coast. The desert changed again. The road was nearly empty. Long stretches passed without seeing another car or a sign of a town. And yet, lining the highway were hundreds of roadside memorials. Crosses and small shrines marking places where people had died. Seeing memorials along a road isn't unusual. Seeing this many was, especially with such empty roads. We speculated that maybe people drove too fast, because of the emptiness, and lost control of the cars, or maybe it had something to do with driving in the fog. Although we did not experience fog, we did see "Neblina" – fog – signs along the road.



Many of the memorials were elaborately decorated. Some held fresh flowers and pictures. Others included personal objects, and in some cases, pieces of cars. We couldn't help but wonder if those fragments were remnants of the accidents themselves. At one point, we watched a man placing flowers at one of the memorials. The closest city, Calama, was more than a hundred miles away. Someone had driven hours through the desert just to visit a loved one buried in the middle of nowhere.

Speaking of Calama, the landscape within this city, known as the mining capital of Chile, grew more industrial. Along the road we passed cement plants, lithium operations, and other mining infrastructure. The desert here was not empty, it was working.

Another detail kept catching us off guard: bus stops, appearing suddenly in the middle of nowhere. No houses. No towns. Just a shelter by the side of the road. We imagined they served the mining routes, linking workers to distant sites. At one of them, we actually saw someone waiting, standing alone in the desert as if this were the most ordinary place in the world to catch a bus. And by the way, we never saw a bus during this entire stretch of hundreds of miles!

Then the scenery shifted once more. The mountains began to change color as the light moved across them. They were smaller, dry and exposed, layered in reds, yellows, greens, and dusty browns. It felt as though each mountain had been carefully paint-brushed by hand. There were so many of them that we felt we were in the natural art museum of the desert. This really made the desert feel expressive.



We stopped briefly at La Mano del Desierto, a massive concrete and corrugated steel hand rising from the sand created by Chilean sculptor Mario Irarrázabal in 1992.

The hand speaks of human fragility, solitude and resilience in one of the harshest landscapes of the planet.

We finally reached Parque Nacional Pan de Azúcar, where the desert met the ocean again, and looked for a place to wild camp. Just a few steps from the park entrance, we found a hidden place to call it a night. It was perfect – two miles of sandy beach, completely to us. From the shore, we spotted humpback whales surfacing slowly in the distance. This was our company during this lodging.



We filmed how we chose the spot, the trials and tribulations of Taco Libre taking us there, and how our TL can quickly transform himself into a nice little home. We shared it in a YouTube video, but no camera can fully capture the feeling of being there: the stillness, the space, the sound of the waves, and the whales at a distance. We intended to stay there one night, but the place and opportunity was too special and perfect to not enjoy for a second night, so that we did!

After a second incredible evening, we packed up and continued south. We passed back through Bahía Inglesa, a lively beach town and unmistakably touristy. We stopped briefly for a quick empanada and then got back on the road toward La Serena.

The change in scenery began almost immediately. After so much dust and stone, we started to see green. At first in small patches, then more boldly as we followed the coast. Out over the water, we spotted whales again. These were again unmistakably humpbacks. They breached fully, lifting their massive bodies out of the sea before crashing back down. Their large pectoral fins made them easy to identify, unlike fin whales, which rarely breach and have much smaller fins.



By the time we entered La Serena, the transformation was complete. Trees appeared everywhere – tall, established, and abundant. The mountains held patches of green, and scattered among them were pink flowers, unexpected and almost startling after so many days of beige and brown.

We loved the desert and enjoyed every minute of it, but driving into La Serena, surrounded by color and life, was heaven-sent.

Leaving La Serena, we turned inland toward the Elqui Valley, and this time the sky surprised us. After weeks of nothing but clear blue skies, we had almost forgotten what clouds looked like. We stayed in a vineyard in Vicuña, the birthplace of Gabriela Mistral, one of Chile's great poets. Camping among vines wasn't planned. It simply happened, one of those quiet gifts the road offers when you're not looking.



That night, we joined a stargazing session with a telescope.

We studied the moon in crisp detail, spotted distant galaxies, and learned about the night sky, *el firmamento*, the vast celestial ceiling above us.

We spotted a few shooting stars and quietly wished for... well, we can't tell you, as we want every wish to come true!

The next day, we explored more of the Elqui Valley, where each corner celebrates Gabriela Mistral. We drove through the ruta del pisco, or the route of pisco, and headed south toward Valparaíso, our final destination for New Year's, with an intended overnight stop at Los Vilos.

On the way to Los Vilos, we spotted eight condors!!! Yes, EIGHT, soaring high above the road. We couldn't help but feel so fortunate to have spotted whales and condors in very unexpected places. It reminded us of what a local Indigenous man told us in San Pedro de Atacama... when imposing animals are present, they bring signs from another world, one just needs to listen with the heart... we believe their presence is just another sign and reminder of the incredible experience we are living day to day in this journey.

Los Vilos itself was nothing special except for a dinner to remember. We stopped into a quiet restaurant, when three guys walked over and asked, "Is that your car?" in English.

We said "yes," surprised. "How did you know?"

"Because you're cool," one replied.

They were a group of Polish overlanders, traveling by motorcycle and car, on a three-week journey of their own. Little by little the rest of the group showed up. We pushed tables together, shared food, routes, and stories. One of them told us about meeting a Colombian woman and falling head over heels, the kind of story that belongs on the road. Before the night ended, they insisted on paying for our dinner.

Each corner traveled has not only brought beautiful sights, local culture, and adventure, but an incredible human touch. That is another reason to travel!

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