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PORTILLO IS ON EVERY SERIOUS SKIER'S BUCKET LIST, BUT THIS RESORT IN THE





by Candice Rainey
photographs by Christopher Churchill

Run

MIDDLE OF THE CHILEAN ANDES IS MORE LIKE SLEEPAWAY CAMP FOR ADULTS WHO ALSO LOVE PISCO SOURS, TEATIME, AND STAYING PUT.

Good



ON A BLUEBIRD day at Portillo, when the sun's warmth is inescapable and the snow is soft and light underfoot, you look out at Laguna del Inca, a celestial indigo lake reflecting the sharp peaked mountains without a ripple, and you think, *This is one of the most gorgeous natural bodies of water I will ever lay my eyes on.* Of course, it would be hidden in the middle of the Chilean Andes, requiring a two-hour drive from Santiago up a series of winding switchbacks. But when you're staring at it from the top of the Lake Run on a grim overcast day, gripping your edges on an impossibly steep face, you think, *This lake, which has turned a dark blue I can only describe as genuinely malignant, may be the end of me.*

"We pulled out five vicuñas from there yesterday," says Portillo's operations manager, Mike Rogan, who offered to take me, my husband, and a few others here, including a Slovenian astrophysicist and a software engineer from San Francisco, despite less-than-stellar snow conditions that day. "Were they alive?" asked someone who had drunk one too many glasses of *vino tinto* at lunch. "Nope," Rogan said. "Okay, now we have to take off our skis and very carefully walk across this shale in our boots." I've skied most of my life, on varied backcountry terrain, in blizzards, and in freezing temperatures. But this was a first for me.

I don't remember exactly how old I was when I heard about Portillo, but I definitely recall listening to too much Ani DiFranco, wearing a hemp necklace, and owning a pair of absurdly long Salomon skis I would click into almost every weekend at Alta, a throwback mountain in Salt Lake City's Little Cottonwood Canyon, near where I lived. Sometime after my sixteenth

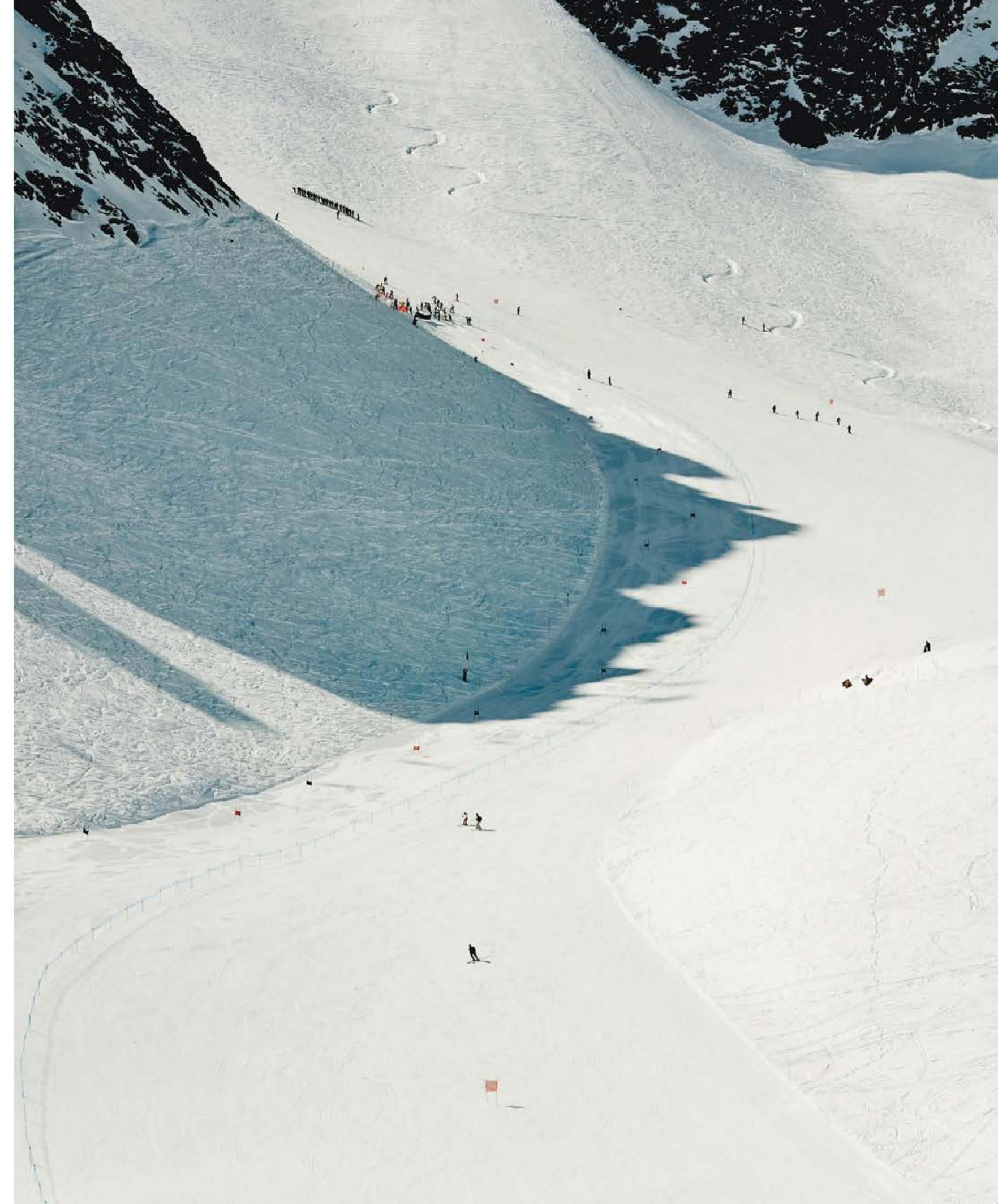
birthday, I began flirting with the idea of going flat-out ski bum, partly to impress boys who were largely unresponsive to hemp-accessories-loving Ani DiFranco fans, but mainly to agitate my parents. I pretended to like Warren Miller films, plastered my bedroom door with neon stickers that blasted affirmations like "Next Year I'm Advancing to K3s!" and tried to tune my own equipment in my bedroom, only to have to pay a dreadlocked tech to remount my bindings.

Despite my bush-league attempts at going full disciple, I spent a lot of time with people who ski more than most of us vacuum, and quickly learned where snow falls in the Southern Hemisphere during North American summers. (Similar to the way Angelenos obsessively talk about traffic, powder acolytes inevitably turn the conversation to this in hopes of breaking 100 days on mountain in a year.) Chile—and more specifically its most storied resort, Portillo, plunked in the middle of the Cordillera near the Uspallata, a frontier pass on the border of central Chile and Argentina—is one of those places where you might experience a nine-foot dump in the middle of August. It's legendary for other reasons, too. It was the first South American resort to host the FIS Alpine World Ski Championships, in 1966, when Jean-Claude Killy became the sport's unofficial rock star. The U.S., Norwegian, Austrian, and Canadian national ski teams typically train here every August among mere mortals, meaning guests seeking bragging rights can hurl themselves down the same Super G course that Julia Mancuso does. And then there's the treeless, intimidatingly vertical Andean terrain, where Incan tambos, or shelters, are still found. Even in a photograph from a crappy ski magazine, it radiates a palpable ancient aura. All to say, Stowe it is not.

I never became a lifelong mountain jock, but Portillo stuck with me. It was one of those bucket list trips I always imagined myself taking when I was firmly in AARP territory, jump-turning out of ankle-deep powder with my new bionic knee replacements. Because really, skiing in Chile isn't something you think you're actually going to do, like, *right now*. Hell no. How could you? There's work, the kid, the laundry. The kid's laundry! Plunking a destination into a bucket list is a form of well-intentioned procrastination: It means you'll go there before you die, yes, but later in life when you're a silver-haired lithe fox who's got it all figured out, like one of those women in the Cialis commercials.

But as we all somewhat reluctantly clicked out of our bindings, threw our skis onto our shoulders, and practically tiptoed across the loose, russet-colored rocks to the part of the run still covered in hard-packed snow, I felt simultaneously enlivened and humbled—grateful that I hadn't put off this trip, which my editor perhaps rightly described as "esoteric." "Try to lodge the tip of your ski into the snow and then step into your binding,"

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Previous page,
from left: A classic
A-frame chalet;
the vertical drop at
Portillo is 2,500
feet. Right: Taking
wide turns down
the Plateau run.





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*Clockwise from
top: Hotel Portillo,
built in 1949;
teatime in the
formal dining room;
the unruly Las
Caracoles passage
in the Andes.*



said Rogan as we all struggled to keep our equipment—or worse, ourselves—from meeting the same fate as the vicuñas. Miraculously, we all managed to get our stuff back on without anything or anyone skating away, and one by one we all shot off separately: the astrophysicist, the engineer, and then my husband and me, gripping our edges with each tight little turn, a narrow trail of white dust floating behind us.

When we finally made it back to the hotel, we thanked Rogan, who congratulated us for, I guess, not tumbling to our premature deaths, as our descent was not exactly a case study in technical fluency. “I told you it would be scary fun,” he said, dropping us off at the ski valet. My husband and I were grinning like two idiots. When you’re a parent with a kid and a demanding job, routines are necessary to survival. They mean the difference between your kid eating whole wheat couscous and salmon or Chinese takeout. But hurling ourselves down an icy mountain, not knowing which turn would lead us back safely, staring at that blue chasm right in front of us the entire time, reminded us we are not solely the makers of Trader Joe’s lists and tacklers of hampers.



HERE’S WHAT I got totally wrong about Portillo: It isn’t the expert-only pilgrimage I had made it out to be in my head. The truth is, the resort, and more accurately the blazing-yellow hotel built in 1949 by the Chilean government, is more like a sleepaway camp for adults and adults with families who want to ski but also drink a great carmenère. Unlike in Jackson Hole or Aspen, there is no cowboy-inflected town or boutique-lined main street to cruise. Portillo deals in the old-school all-inclusive ski week. That means when you check in on Saturday with the 449 other guests—mainly Americans, Argentines, Brazilians, Chileans, and Uruguayans—you’re eating, hot-tubbing, and rehashing the day’s runs together in and around the mother ship. This is the kind of *Dirty Dancing* by way of Italian ski lodge that has its very own social director, an affable, grinning Chilean who’ll toss a few bottles of wine in his backpack on a snowshoe excursion. The guy who takes your boots and stores them for you doesn’t need a claim check; he remembers almost every face and knows where your boots are when you come back

WHEN TO GO

Portillo usually opens in late June and won’t close until early October. I went the second week of August and kept hearing from regulars that it’s the best time to go: You get warmer days and a better chance of major snowfall. (It’s when the national teams tend to train as well.)

GETTING THERE

You’ll want to take [LATAM Airlines](#), which flies direct from New York and Los Angeles. I flew overnight, drank a few glasses of terrific Chilean wine, and woke up in Santiago. Portillo will arrange a transfer from the airport, and you can be on the mountain by 2 P.M.

DO YOU RENT?

I loathe renting equipment, but Portillo has a good range of high-performance, powder, and shaped skis. Next time I’d just bring my boots. If you do want your own stuff, don’t ship it ahead—it could get stuck in customs.

for them. It even has a Swiss yoga teacher, Heidi (she’s also a ski instructor), who will sit down with you in the bar to tell you how she first came to Argentina by boat and rode the six-hour train to get here back in the sixties. (Exactly how old she is nobody seems to know.)

While there are certainly those more ambitious types wanting to be tested by Portillo’s couloirs, chutes, and untamed backcountry, the majority of skiers I saw here seemed more Euro in their approach, preferring to leisurely hit the soft, dry groomers, revel in the warm afternoons, and drink pisco sours in a heated outdoor pool after teatime. And because breakfast, lunch, and dinner are included, all served by jacketed waiters in a formal dining room with leather-paneled walls and tables dressed in white linens, there’s no agonizing over where to eat or time spent trying to nab a reservation for five at some cut-rate Nobu. You show up with your family, or by yourself, or with someone you met that day, drink stand-out Chilean sauvignon blanc, order off the menu (always add a sliced avocado, and opt for peeled oranges for dessert), and walk 50 steps to the bar, where Jaime Cantellano, who’s worked here for 48 years, will be mixing your pisco sour before the Chilean cover band (three words I never thought I’d type) gets the party going.

For non-joiners like myself, this forced communing may sound like some kind of fresh hell on paper. But the hotel and its rituals, not to mention the 500-plus people working and living here throughout the season, have a way of making the institutional socializing feel unforced. Take tea, which is always held in the formal dining room and always at 5 P.M., right after the lifts close. Everyone, still in their ski clothes, arrives

unprompted (there are no cruise ship cowbells or PA announcements) to snack on fresh-baked rolls, sweet jams, palm honey, and cheese and sip *maté de coca*, an herbal tea made from coca leaves native to Chile. The whole experience is restorative in a way that pounding microbrews one after another is not, and it is the kind of foreign custom that makes you question your American reflexes. As a Brazilian twentysomething I rode a chairlift with told me early in the week, after I admitted to skipping this Portillo après tradition, “You must do tea. Everybody does tea.”

Unlike new-build gingerbread ski lodges that can seem to measure character in the number of mounted antlers hanging on the wall, Portillo reads authentically Old World, with its wood-paneled great room, scuffed booths that look like they were carved out of prehistoric tree trunks, and framed portraits of South American ski royalty dating back to the ’50s. It’s an intangible soul that owner Henry Purcell has largely kept intact since moving here from New York to run the resort in 1961. His uncle Bob Purcell had

purchased Portillo in an auction from the Chilean government (turns out he and his business partner were the only ones who put in a bid) and figured his 26-year-old nephew, a graduate of the Cornell University School of Hotel Administration and an executive at Hilton, should run it, despite the fact that he didn't know how to ski and spoke very little Spanish. "When I walked into this place, I almost turned around and went home," Purcell tells me over tea and chocolate-covered *alfajores*. "The only person here was the caretaker, who slept in the living room in front of the fireplace. But he also had his sheep with him. It was filthy." The plan was, he tells me, to stay for two years, then head back to Hilton to work for its international arm. "But I signed up for another two years. Then another. I guess I was stubborn."

Purcell, now 82, an avid skier and a fluent Spanish speaker, bought the resort in 1980, and today his son Miguel, a former Chilean Olympic skier who was raised at Portillo, is the general manager. Much like his hotel, Purcell is from another era, always speaking softly and slowly, in a tone that intimates he doesn't think running a ski resort in a country that's been ruled by both a Socialist regime and a military dictatorship is worth going on and on about. Let's just say that Purcell has seen some stuff unrelated to ski lore. Castro came to visit once, during the summer of 1972. Henry took him on a tour of the grounds to get a better view of the Andes. Castro insisted that his mountains in Cuba were higher than Purcell's and that he could climb Cerro Inca (which tops out at 13,780 feet) after lunch. "I told him, 'I don't think so,'" Purcell says. They were separated by their minders pretty quickly after that. In 1977, a group of models—including a young Jerry Hall—came to shoot a Neiman Marcus fur catalog but were snowed in for close to a week. With nowhere to go but the hotel's disco, the models reportedly went on a bit of a bender with a different kind of white powder. "I remember how nice everybody was," says Purcell. "The group was friendly and got along well with the other guests." Apparently, there's a screenplay in the works.



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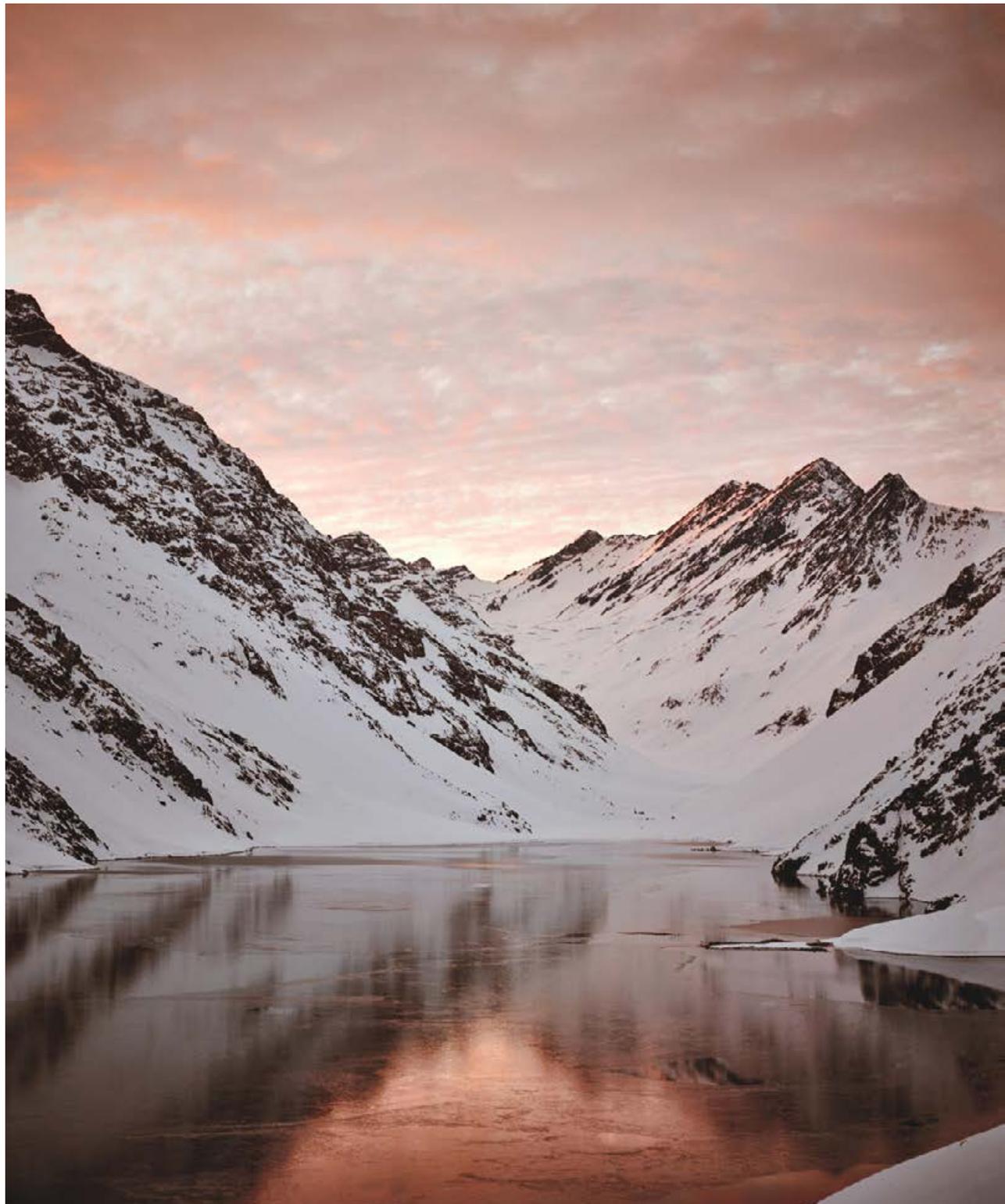
RIDING ONE OF Portillo's four *va et vients*—a baffling contraption that can only be described as a much faster tow rope you put between your legs and trust to God that the other three people on it don't do something stupid as it shoots you up the mountain at 17 miles per hour—will make you nervous at first. The point is to get those looking for added vertical up steep chutes, which, in the Andes, are prone to avalanches.

On our first day, I started out on the Cónдор, and for the first time in years felt genuinely awkward on snow. I made a few trips, up and down, up and down, and eventually riding the *va et vient* became almost as fun as making giant wide jump turns down the steep, narrow face. While I was waiting at the top, I turned around and saw men dressed in fatigues riding the slingshot up. I later learned that this was the High Mountain School of the Chilean Army, which has been training here since 1954, though some soldiers have never skied in their lives and are sometimes called "the green avalanche," for obvious reasons. It was somewhat surreal, as was skiing through an abandoned train tunnel or taking a lesson with a group of strangers, some of whom spoke English, some of whom did not, including our instructor. Portillo seems to trade in these little oddities, revealing themselves slowly over the course of the week until you're one of the initiated.

Of course, the ultimate initiation here may be tackling the Super C, a back-country couloir that experts come from all over the world to drop into. To do it, you start with a strenuous two-hour hike in the morning, followed by a narrow traverse that, when Googled, turns up a lot of stern warnings. I've heard from others that when you reach the top, you get a straight shot of Aconcagua—the largest mountain in the world outside of Asia. I'd like to think I'd train for this someday (which they suggest anyone living at sea level should do since you'll be climbing to an altitude of nearly 13,000 feet) and come back to conquer it, if only to be one of those people privy to this secret handshake. I wouldn't want to put it off too long. ♦

SIDE-TRIPPING TO THE ATACAMA

“Chile took in the driest desert in the world, a glaciated archipelago of a thousand islands, and most of the things you can imagine in between,” writes Sara Wheeler in her excellent *Travels in a Thin Country*. Indeed, Chile—2,600 miles long and no more than 115 miles wide—has some pretty mind-blowing landscape shifts, which is why I decided to tack the Atacama Desert onto my Portillo trip. You come here to see the Milky Way more clearly than anywhere else on earth, explore surreal rock formations like the Valle de la Luna, and head up 14,000 feet to experience some trippy natural geysers before dawn, all with incredibly informed guides arranged by most hotels here. Stay at [Tierra Atacama](#), Portillo’s sister hotel, which also has a great little hydrotherapy spa. Or opt for Portillo’s “mini week”; during certain times, you can book three or four days there and receive 20 percent off both hotels. [Awasi](#), a Relais & Châteaux property, and [Explora](#), which reopened in December, are also solid options. Fly LATAM from Santiago to Calama (about two hours) and have your hotel arrange for a transfer to San Pedro de Atacama.



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From left: “Latin Americans come to Portillo from sea level, and it’s as if they’ve never heard of altitude

sickness,” says Portillo operations manager Mike Rogan; Laguna del Inca at sunset—no filter needed.