

# Chile

## Calama & Atacama Desert



Main Street San Pedro



Death Valley

## Calama , San Pedro de Atacama (Desert)

Iquique to Calama, Chile  
Airports: SCDA to SCCF  
Handler: self, assisted by Marcelo  
Fuel: not required  
Distance: 163nm  
Date: 26 January 2020

Our next flight to Calama a Copper mining town is only about 40 minutes away. We are very happy to have Marcelo joins us and show Amir through the process of lodging domestic flight plans and customs special process required in Iquique due to its "Tax Free Zone" before our departure. Amir tried to lodge the flight plan using ForeFlight software and for the first time ever in Chile it worked, this will be a break through and make flight lodgement a breeze in Chile.

Marcelo is also a pilot and sits right seat doing the communication in Spanish to air traffic controllers.

This is the first time anyone has seen the Vision Jet and once again it is so nice to see the reactions of pilots as they are shown the many features in Avionics and safety. We have a large number of aircrew and Airservices all coming to see this marvellous plane.

The flight goes over vast very red mountains and flat desert, it feels similar to the top end of Western Australia or Saudi Arabia desert.

The snow covered Andes of Chile on our right with a few large thunderstorms in the distance. The terrain is covered in cloud as we get closer to the destination except for a few mountains popping their tops out of the flat cloud cover even though we are at 17,000 feet.

The RNAV approach via MALPO to runway 28 needs to be executed very quickly, it is a steep approach due to the high terrain around us from 11,000 feet through cloud and very bumpy hot air, to final; dropping to below 8,000 feet, landing in the altitude of a little over 7,500 feet.

We rent a car and drive 100km to San Pedro de Atacama, part of the nature reserve Los Flamencos, a range of mountains running East to West.

There are many sites here and a lot of things to do: (from Wiki)  
Chaxas Lagoon, part of Los Flamencos National Reserve in the Salar de Atacama, inhabited by pink flamingos.  
El Tatio, a geyser field with over 80 active geysers.  
Llano de Chajnantor Observatory, a radio-telescope site, home of "ALMA", the Atacama Large Millimeter Array.  
Laguna Miscanti (Miscanti Lagoon) and Laguna Miñiques (Miñiques Lagoon), two neighbouring altiplanic lagoons at the altitude of 4,200 m (13,500 ft). An astonishingly beautiful place.  
Licancabur, a notable volcano near San Pedro de Atacama.  
Pukará de Quitor (Fort Quitor). A fortification built by the Atacameño people in the 12th century.  
Puritama Hot Springs  
Salar de Atacama, a giant salt area (3,000 km<sup>2</sup> / 1,864.11 mi<sup>2</sup>) in the middle of the Atacama Desert.  
Valle de la Luna ("Valley of the Moon"), a moon-like landscape with ruins of old Chilean salt mines, and worker huts.  
Valle de la Muerte (Death Valley): a valley where gigantic dunes and rocks abound.

We are staying at the Naturalis Hotel just out of the main town and over a river creek, a new small hotel in chalet style and very peaceful surrounds.

We drove through the desert de Luna national park which reminded us a little of Nevada a very little, and in the hot afternoon visited the salt lakes of Atacama which you need to traverse a 40 km corrugated road. There was a huge thunderstorm in the distance and as we continued on the gravel road the rain hit us as we travelled a little further the road started to have water flooding over the sides and initially we turned around to head back to town but as we could see other vehicles and tourist vans were continuing, we



Salt lakes



turned back and continued as well. The lakes are a small section of many KMs of salt flats, these lakes are very deep and such a beautiful blue against the stark white salt formations and all surrounded by brown ancient lava deposits that are now eroding to form an interesting landscape. After a swim/float we head back on the road but are stopped by another vehicle telling us that the road has washed away and we need to turn around and go to Peine a town that will take us over 260km away, not much of a choice and lucky we have enough fuel, we turn around and start a journey on harsh hot gravel roads that go further and further deep into the desert. We have no water and see all along this road tyres left from other traveller's cars, we really have no choice than to carry on. We are a group of three other vehicles and out of data range with no maps guidance for over 100km of reasonably good gravel road which take us through the commercial salt mines and over the vast salt pans, it is fascinating terrain that we would not have seen if not for the detour. Every now and then the maps guidance comes alive and there are very few signs, we go through a section of road that is under water and mud, the first car hammers through,



Roads of salt

the second car also, barely, they both wait for us, very kindly, we reverse up to get some speed and floor it to the water which stops us to a crawl and a slide sideways then the tyres get a little traction and we eventually crawl along out of the water. So lucky really, the main road is another 10km which will takes us

back to San Pedro town, still another 98km, the whole detour took us over two and half hours.



The next days trip is a two hour drive up to a Mountain to see Laguna Miscanti (Miscanti Lagoon) and Laguna Miñiques (Miñiques Lagoon), two neighbouring altiplanic lagoons at the altitude of 4,200 m (about 14,000 ft). Taking us to altitude for the first time without wings on our sides;) The landscape up to the mountain takes us through the main road past the salt pans that we travelled yesterday and from dry barren dunes and dry bare mountain emerge huge rock ravines, where flooding waters can wash away roads in minutes to large flat plains of lush vegetation, alpine clump



grasses and small fine leaf bush flora. With the special wildlife unique to this area Vicuna (similar to Llama but smaller and more delicate a camelid species) we get a very close encounter with them just a few meters from the roadside grazing on the grasses.

A short walk out of the car to take in the spectacular view over the lagoons and a couple of motor bike riders pull up next to us, one of them is looking very grey and squats down trying to get his breath.

I soon start to feel the effects of lack of oxygen also at this height.

Amir has done Hypoxia training with the Vision Jet training and assists the bike riders, advises him to get off the mountain as soon as practical, the biker takes the advice and within 10

minutes disappears back down the mountain. I feel my head is light and buzzy and my heart is beating very fast and I'm trying to control my breathing. I feel like I'm hyperventilating and Amir tells me to start talking as you can't hyperventilate when your talking he gives me a quiz  $8 \times 9$ ? I say  $8 \times 8 = 64$  so is  $9 \times 8 = 72$

The feeling of the ground moving under my feet and a very euphoric buzz, quite enjoyable actually.

Our third day in this beautiful landscape we visit the "Death Valley" and this is the most spectacular; much more interesting than the Moon Valley. It is also a big attraction to watch the sunset from these Valleys.



The lagoons



The town of San Pedro is very surprising, the streets are compacted red clay, all the houses, hostels, hotels are behind mud brick and red mud rendered walls. Enter inside the shops which look like nothing from the outside and there is a modern arty space. The restaurants very modern and trendy and the food they serve is excellent gourmet quality. The best way to explain the town is wild west meets hipster. Wild dogs roam the town freely and there are many buskers all playing interesting music, it really was one of the funnest towns we have seen.



Death Valley





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Salt lakes