

Chilling Out in Chile

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Skiers Who Hate Summer Can Find Frosty Slopes, Powder Snow and Winter Weather at Four Resorts Near Santiago

SANTIAGO, Chile –It's summertime, hot and hazy.

Your skis are buried in the back of the garage. Dig them out.

Because skiers who spend their summer counting the days till winter can fulfill their ski fantasies now. Snow season is in full swing in the Chilean Andes.

Chile's ski season begins officially in June, but August and September are the best months to go. The weather and snow conditions are more dependable, the prices are lower and it's much less crowded-- and it's easier to get there than most people think. Twice-a-week flights leave Los Angeles in afternoon and arrive in Santiago the next morning, causing no more jet lag than taking the red-eye to New York. Little more than an hour's bus ride later, you can be in one of Chile's four major ski resorts.

Only 35 miles from Santiago up a steep curvy road, at 8,860 feet, the base facilities for La Parva are terraced at the foot of the ski area. Old families from Santiago have skied this area for generations. Chileans—as well as an increasing number of Argentines and Brazilians—own many of the condominiums and some private homes. La Parva is their weekend getaway.

On that first morning in La Parva last August, I stood at 11,910 feet in the clear crisp air, looking down on sumptuous white rolls and hillocks in brilliant sunshine.

An overnight blizzard had dropped two feet of snow over the Andes, and without a tree or a rock in sight, and only an occasional skier, my companions and I had nothing to stop us from pointing our skis in any direction. Swooping down gullies, up over ridges, making first track through knee-deep powder, we had to force ourselves to end the ecstasy and traverse back to the lift—or else find ourselves below with a long walk back up.

“I never thought I could ski in powder,” remarked a gasping, excited New Yorker.

I never thought I could either, until I was let loose on the wide open terrain of La Parva.

Always above tree-line, the runs are clearly marked, but there is nothing to inhibit an average skier from meandering off the piste into untracked snow. Expert skiers revel in this complete freedom to fly off cornices, drop down chutes and to experience, without restrictions, the sport of skiing.

Beginners and intermediates can ski with reckless abandon or cautious euphoria over miles of open terrain. In Chile, there are no rules imposed by the ski area to protect them from liability, or you from your own negligence. You are responsible for your own safety—and your own adventures.

Accommodations in La Parva are in modern two and three bedroom condominiums. It's a good idea to have your driver stop at a supermercado in Santiago to buy food on your way to the resort. There is a dining room and small bar for hotel guests, plus a small but lively restaurant called La Marmita.

This is where we ate the night of the blizzard. Long wooden tables were crowded with cheese and meat fondue pots, devices for heating raclette (a cheese dish), and a variety of condiments. Bottles of robust red Chilean wine from the 100-year-old vineyard of Cousino Macul were uncorked at each table.

The owner kept the blender whirring with pisco sours—a mixture of lemon juice and pisco, a Peruvian brandy. A generous local who was celebrating his 50th birthday invited us all to share his champagne. This was definitely the locals' watering hole, as ski instructors from Canada, the U.S., Australia, Chile and Argentina mingled with the guests. Champagne and Pisco flowed. The tables were pulled to the wall and soon guests were making drinks behind the bar. The bartender was dancing on the tables with guests, and cooks, waiters, instructors and local ski racers joined in the merriment that erased all national identities and joined us as skiers in an evening of raucous camaraderie.

La Parva is wide open and friendly. You can ski from your door to two chairlifts and nine Pomalifts (a chair-less lift that employs a disc which one straddles while being pulled uphill.) These will transport you over gentle terrain on to the more demanding slopes where the Canadian National team trains in summer. We watched them jumping off the roofs of farmhouses between slalom runs.

Each day ends around 5:30, p.m. with a golden alpenglow washing over the slopes, then fading as a brilliant red sunset smolders in the western sky beyond Santiago.

Due to road closures, we left La Parva by skiing over the pass at 12,000 feet down to Valle Nevado at 9,000, where we found 33 square miles of skiable terrain, and a ski area still being enlarged. Every time I got off a lift and thought I'd reached the outer limits of Valle Nevado, another Pomalift unfolded across another mountain top. We skied on groomed pistes and wide open untracked powder runs.

"This is like four-and-a-half Vails," a ski instructor from Colorado remarked. Valle Nevado is the biggest, newest and most-talked-about ski area in South America. When fully developed, and if joined with nearby Farellones/El Colorado and La Parva, it will be one of the largest ski complexes in the world.

If you've ever longed for the solitude that cross-country skiers enjoy, with all the conveniences of a modern resort, then this ski area is for you. With three peaks, Valle Nevado has room for 30,000 skiers. The day I was there, only 200 were skiing. Every trail and lift has clear directional sign with pictures showing the best route to the lodge, so, barring a blizzard, you cannot get lost.

Heli-skiing is available through the hotel at reasonable rates, and the open terrain, the probability of dry, light snow and the proximity to the lodge make this exotic option seem uncomplicated, accessible and a good investment.

Only about 60 miles from Santiago, Valle Nevado is being developed by the same French company that developed Les Arcs in France. This well-funded and dedicated group of investors plans to increase the number of lifts from the present eight to more than 50. The attractive 160-bed hotel, the condominiums, apartments and the superb restaurant featuring juicy steaks from Argentina and fresh vegetables give Valle Nevado a special Chilean/French flavor.

The first skiers at the granddaddy of South American ski resorts—Portillo—were Norwegian mountaineers who came in 1890 to study the construction of a railroad between Chile and Argentina. The first lift, built in 1937, had wooden towers.

In 1947, it was replaced by a chairlift, and by 1949, the first hotel was built. Portillo has attracted some impressive ski personalities to its school—Emil Allais, Stein Erickson, Peter Estin and Othmar Schneider were the pioneers.

For years I had been impressed by stories of this legendary and remote ski area: its World Cup-quality downhill, its speed skiing records, heli-skiing, fierce storms and avalanches. When I finally landed in a helicopter in front of the bright yellow Portillo Hotel (the road was closed by 4 avalanches), I was surprised to find such a benign little spot. Nearby was a still lake and all around, soaring peaks.

Because 80% of its guests are repeat visitors, the hotel has a comfortable clubbiness about it. There are only 478 beds and no plans to expand, so make your reservations early.

Although the road closes infrequently, and seldom for more than two days, at such times the management does everything possible to get travelers through. The day I arrived, two helicopters moved 160 people in and 70 out. If you are traveling independently, it's a good idea to call the resort before you start out, either from Santiago or from the nearest town of Los Andes.

As soon as I checked into my fourth-floor room in Portillo, I stood transfixed by the view from the window. The ice melting on the Laguna del Inca gave a fractured reflection of rock, snow and jagged peaks slashing the sky. I dashed down stairs and out to the nearest chairlift.

Portillo offers some of the most challenging terrain—and ski lifts—in South America. Where avalanches would wipe out lift towers on steep upper slopes, the French invented the *Va et Vient* lift, also known as “the sling shot.” This contraption shoots four people standing abreast up 2,442 feet, where they scramble to disengage themselves without falling back down the mountain or on top of each other. Imagine a high-speed four person Pomalift with no off-ramp.

On the lower slopes, long groomed runs lead to the very steep *gargantua* (throat) that seems to drop right into the Laguna del Inca. Overall, there is an interesting variety of terrain, but not a lot of it. There are other options, however, such as heli-skiing near the Argentine border, guided off-piste excursions, snowboarding and parasailing.

I tried tandem hang-gliding. Strapped in with an instructor, we skied straight off a cliff and soared out over the ski runs. The hotel was a tiny yellow box, as we circled above and then came in low across the still, icy lake, landing with ease by the rental shop door. A camera mounted on the wing strut recorded our flight, making the \$40.00 fee well worth it.

The Portillo Hotel is the center of activities. It has a small outdoor pool, an ice rink when the lake freezes, a large gym for indoor soccer, volleyball or basket ball, and a beauty salon, spa, and video and game rooms. At night, an air of Old World elegance prevails: men wear coats and ties to dinner, and women dress in slacks or skirts and fancy sweaters. On the slopes and in the hotel at Portillo, I felt I was in a serious ski resort and very much in the Andes.

Some 250 miles south of Santiago is town of Chillán, which can be reached by car on a good road, by train (six hours), or by plane (one hour). This ski area, known as Termas de Chillan, is 51 miles further, at an elevation of 5,900 feet.

The hotel at Termas de Chillan is comfortable, but not luxurious. It has 350 beds in about 100 rooms and its main attraction, (other than skiing), are the hot thermal baths that have existed for 150 years. There are sulfur baths, iron baths, mud facials, hydro-massage, plus sauna and steam baths. New owners of Chillan have ambitions to improve the ski facilities and enlarge the hotel, making it a major-league ski area.

Arriving at the hotel for lunch, we were serenaded by an orchestra that also played in the evenings for dancing. We devoured an abundant buffet of meats, cheeses, salads, fruits and seafood specialties, then rushed out to enjoy the longest run in Chillan--5.6 miles.

Over unexpected rolls and into blind gullies, we skied on spring snow into a forest of moss-covered trees. A bus was waiting at the bottom to return us to the hotel.

One of the pleasures I looked forward to each day was a long soak in one of the three mineral pools outside the hotel. Only a few flying snowballs launched by rambunctious Brazilians interrupted this perfect après-ski moment.

Chillan had the most varied terrain and snow conditions of any place I skied in Chile. We had one day of powder on very steep slopes, and the next day we rode the longest chairlift in South America (8,200 feet). It took 25 minutes to reach the top. Someone suggested an in-flight magazine. From there we had 15,000 acres of slopes to choose from. With volcanoes above and thermal springs belching steam from the side of the mountains, Chillan was yet another unusual experience in Chile.