



Edge of the earth

Chile's gateway to Patagonia is wonderfully wild

DENISE CULLEN

The temperature is barely 8C when we touch down in Puerto Natales, the unofficial capital of Chilean Patagonia. I trot briskly from the tarmac to the small terminal building, unprepared for the cold, which is amplified by wind gusts and rain that falls in icy splinters rather than drops.

Still shivering as the shuttle bus lurches away from the kerb, I use one sleeve to wipe condensation from the window. Outside, the view of snow-capped mountains, inky waters dotted with black-necked swans and their cygnets, and an endless cloud-filled sky, brightens me.

When we reach Remota Patagonia Lodge, a luxurious eco-conscious hotel located just outside town, the receptionist hands over a room key to which is attached a stuffed woolly lamb. I feel the last of the chill thaw.

This small but symbolic gesture also sets the tone for the rest of my stay in a region where sheep have been farmed since the late 19th century on vast estancias (ranches), which sprawl across the bleak, muted landscape.

Even the design of the hotel, dreamt up by Chilean architect German del Sol, honours traditional Patagoni-

an barns. From the air, Remota resembles a giant sheep pen. Simple, functional, unadorned. Grass from the hillside has been re-laid on the roof.

Yet from ground level, it's a stylish study in black wood and glass, with the jagged, irregular forms of its two accommodation wings tumbling down the hillside like twin glaciers. At the centre of the 72-room structure is an open grassy courtyard which the hotel press release declares is "empty of things but full of meaning".

What del Sol, perhaps, didn't envisage was that this negative space would come to be occupied by a colony of rabbits, forging burrows under the narrow, enclosed walkway leading from one wing to another.

One morning, over a lazy, late buffet breakfast, I watch them pop up, cavort, and disappear.

I then set off on foot to explore the heart of this small port city of around 20,000 people.

At a roundabout near the entrance, there's a statue of the now-extinct Milodon, a giant ground sloth. Standing on its hind legs, the statue stretches its front paws as if in greeting.

The monument acts as an unofficial advertisement for the nearby Cueva de Milodon (Milodon Cave) where, in 1895, explorer Hermann Eberhard found the skin, hair and other remains of this prehistoric beast.



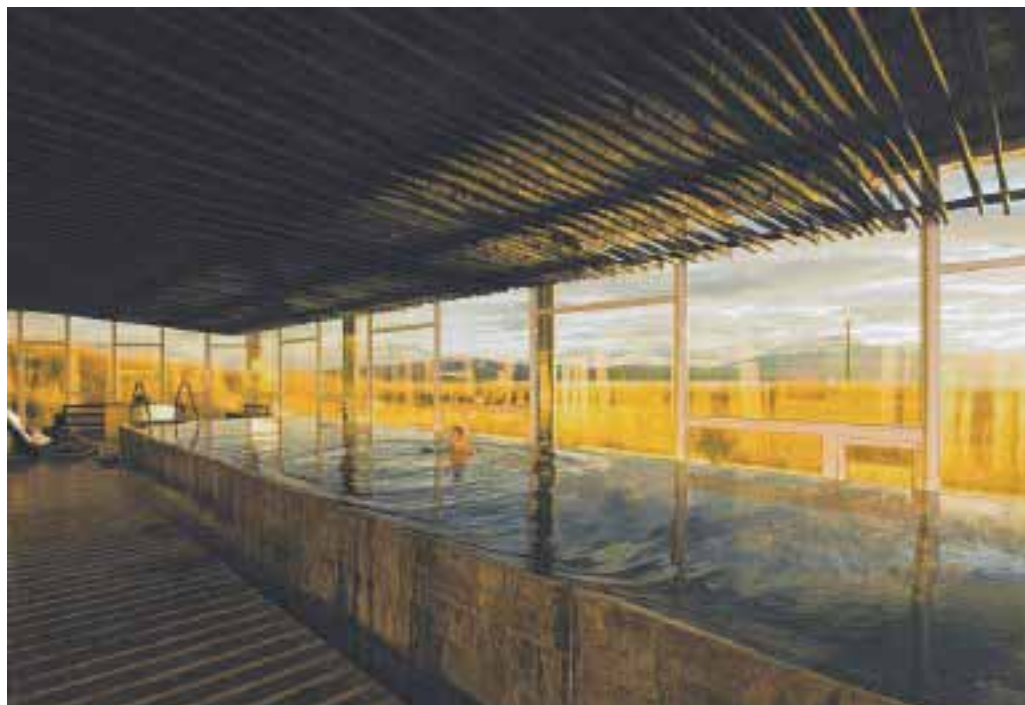
Serrano Glacier, top; Santolla restaurant, above

Bracing against the cold wind that blasts in from Antarctica, I wander the uneven streets, taking in the waterfront promenade, colourful street murals, modest shops, corrugated iron houses, and weathered old Muelle Historico pier.

It's atmospheric rather than pretty – more wild than civilised.

Some have described Puerto Natales as a frontier town. To me, it feels like the end of the earth. I wonder, if I just keep walking, whether I'll fall right off the edge of the map.

Puerto Natales is also billed as the gateway to the spectacular Torres del Paine National Park, with its granite peaks, glaciers, and lakes bobbing with icebergs – spectacular but unforgiving terrain. The month after we visited, a wild blizzard and hurricane-force winds on the iconic O Circuit within the park caused the deaths



os, an estancia of some 5000 Corriedale sheep and 200 Hereford cows, is in the historic Cerro Castillo region. We arrive to find farmer John Nicol turning a crucified lamb over an open fire, the flames dancing higher as fat spills onto coals. This dish, *cordero al palo* (spit-roasted lamb), is as Chilean as the mugs of pisco sour his wife, Pame, presses into our hands.

Their son, Antonio Nicol, explains that his great grandfather was Scottish and part of the wave of farmers who played a pivotal role in establishing sheep farming in Patagonia. His family has been working this land for half a century; the tourism business is new.

After the lamb is carved, we adjourn to a purpose-built dining room to feast on it, accompanied by salads and *sopaipilla*, a fried bread that is typical of the region and reminds me of an unsweetened doughnut. Later, their other son, Andres, dressed in gaucho (Chilean cowboy) garb, treats us to a demonstration of herding and shearing, and Pame walks us through the workshop where she spins raw wool into yarn.

Back at Remota Patagonia Lodge, I slip on swimmers and a robe and set off to the hotel's indoor infinity pool. There's a sign urging visitors to SWIM SLOWLY, so I take this as permission to float on my back and swim lazy laps until it's time for my scheduled deep tissue massage. My therapist ushers me into a darkened room with a heated massage bed and begins to knead out the knots. Outside, a fresh squall is starting to build. I drift off to the rhythm of the rain on the window, swaddled in warmth and grateful for this shelter from the storm.

Denise Cullen was a guest of the Adventure Travel Trade Association and Chile Travel.

chile.travel
adventuretravel.biz

Clockwise from above left: Remota Patagonia Lodge, indoor pool; lodge lounge area; shopping in in Puerto Natales; Last Hope Distillery; Tierra de Ovejeros

IN THE KNOW

Puerto Natales is located about 3½ hours by air from Chile's capital Santiago. Fly via Puerto Montt or take one of LATAM Airlines' almost daily direct flights.

latamairlines.com

Remota Patagonia Lodge opens for the 2026/2027 season in October. Rooms start at CLP 323,000 (about \$500) a night, including breakfast.

remotahotel.com

Tierra De Ovejeros is located about one hour by road from Puerto Natales. Wool tour and spit-roasted meat from \$US128 (about \$180) a person.

tierradeovejeros.com

Last Hope Distillery is open Tuesday to Saturday during high season (October to April); free tours daily.

lasthopedistillery.com

Santolla offers seafood and "a little bit of land". Open Monday to Saturday for lunch and dinner. No reservations.

instagram.com/santolla.rest/

Lago Grey offers a range of half and full-day excursions.

lagogrey.com

via hypothermia of five international hikers. But there is plenty to do in and around Puerto Natales without setting foot on the trails. Another morning, I rug up against a 2C dawn to clamber aboard the smart-looking FDS III catamaran for a two-hour journey through the Seno Ultima Esperanza (Last Hope Sound). Coffee and croissants filled with *manjar* (Chilean caramel sauce) amply compensate for the early wake-up call.

We cruise past dramatic landscapes shaped by ancient glacial action – towering rock faces riven with waterfalls, jagged peaks wrapped in low-hanging cloud. There are none of the hoped-for sea lions lolling on the rocks on the day we pass through, but the sight of condors circling above the impossibly high cliffs is exhilarating.

We disembark at the small pier of Puerto Toro, which serves as the starting point for a 30-minute hike through lush native forests of evergreen *Coihues* and *Nirres* (Antarctic beech) to a platform providing a view of the Serrano Glacier.

As the glacier's hulking, ice-blue form comes in sight, an almighty crack rends the air and I brace for an avalanche. Sensing my panic, our guide explains that the sound comes from a chunk of ice breaking away into the surrounding lagoon. Hearing the glacier can be as thrilling as seeing it, he adds.

Our journey back to Puerto Natales involves passing the equally spectacular Balmaceda Glacier as we sip warming glasses of whiskey served with glacier ice.

Though Remota has an excellent restaurant, there are ample places to drink or dine in town.

One night, I kick back at the Last Hope Distillery, helmed by a couple of Australians, and billed as the world's southernmost distillery. Another night, I visit Santolla, humbly housed in a shipping container, to devour plump scallops and succulent legs of king crab.

Cultural attractions are appealing. Tierra de Ovejeros

