



# Andean

# Dream

...  
AS A SKI DESTINATION,  
CHILE HAS IT ALL —  
AND NOW IT'S GETTING MORE

STORY BY MICHAEL MIRACLE  
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MARK EPSTEIN

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“If I had to pick

only one place in the world to ski, I would pick Chile. I would give up skiing in North America for that.”

These are not the words of a proud South American. The mouth hypothetically bidding adieu to an entire continent of skiing belongs to Greg Harms, an Oregon-born professional ski instructor and guide who not only has sampled almost every A-list ski destination in Europe and the North American West, but also has worked as a heli-skiing guide in Alaska and Greenland.

In other words, he is a man with some perspective.

And in gushing about Chile, Harms is far from alone. Instructors, guides, professional free skiers, and World

Cup racers the world over respond with remarkable consistency when asked about Chilean skiing: It is exceptional, they say to a man (or woman); it offers an abundance of terrain, quality of snow, warmth of hospitality, and general authenticity of experience that stand unmatched in the ski world.

“It’s most similar to big-mountain European skiing, with the friendliness of the Rockies but with a relaxed attitude only available here,” says Mark Jones, a guide who first came to Chile from Canada in 1978 and now operates Chilean Heli Ski\* and its newly opened Puma Lodge. “The slopes are on the same or a larger scale to the bigger developed areas of the Alps. And the snow is outstanding, like none other on the planet. It’s exception-

ally light and dry and falls with a big crystal structure, a true champagne powder that’s drier even than that of Utah or Banff.”

That Chile has become the darling of the global ski cognoscenti is all the more remarkable when you consider that the

country claims fewer ski areas than Connecticut and Massachusetts combined — a mere 14. Among those, only three — Valle Nevado, Nevados de Chillán, and Portillo — could be considered bona fide global-skier attractions.

But while Chile’s ski areas may be few in number, their terrain stats are numerically superior to any you’ll find in North America — starting with the largest ski resort in the southern hemisphere, Valle Nevado.\*

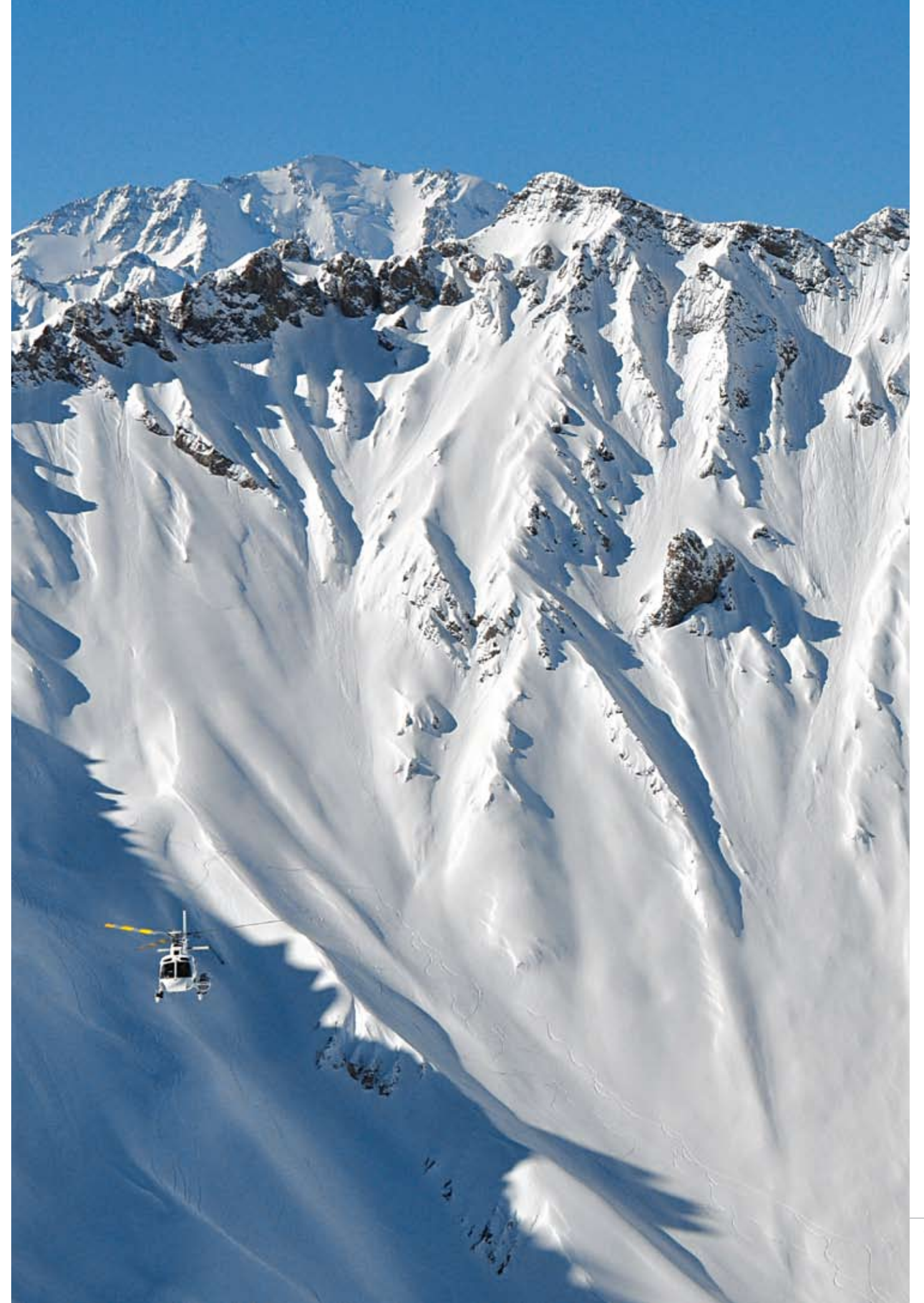
With a vertical drop of 2,658 feet (comparable to that of Colorado’s Copper Mountain or Taos, New Mexico) and more than 23,000 acres of skiable terrain, it’s four times larger than Vail, but its 1,300 beds (split among three hotels and a handful of apartments) are about one-tenth what you’ll find at Vail. The resort was planned and constructed by French developers in the late 1980s, and though its purpose-built look (similar to France’s Les Arcs) isn’t to everyone’s taste, when each skier essentially confronts his or her own private Back Bowl upon hitting the snow, few seem to complain.

The snow, of course, can hit too. “A classic Andes storm is like a Tahoe storm,” says Harms. “It doesn’t throw down a couple of feet, it throws down a couple of meters. You can get snowed in just like you do in Alta.”

You might be thinking, “But can’t you just ski in the trees?” Not really, because Chilean skiing is almost entirely devoid of trees. Though it takes some adjusting to the absence of speed-gauging perspective, it “makes skiers more imaginative,” says Mimi Silvino, a snowboard instructor and massage therapist from Redondo Beach, California, who lives endless winters among her home state, Chile, Colorado, and Alaska. “It makes people more willing to explore the other terrain



FROM TOP: ANTON SPONAR/COURTESY SKI ARPA; CLARK FYANS; OPPOSITE: CLARK FYANS





FROM TOP: CODY DOUCETTE/COURTESY SKI ARPA; GRANT GUNDERSON; OPPOSITE: GABE ROGEL/AURORA (3)

features — the cliffs and chutes and bowls.” It also makes for some of the best cruising on the planet.

If you really must have trees, however, Chile does have a resort for you: Nevados de Chillán.\* You probably have heard of it, even if you don’t recognize the name, because for nearly 30 years it was known as Termas de Chillán and many skiers still call it by its old name. Farther south than Valle Nevado and nearly as big, Nevados de Chillán offers not only the Chilean rarity of tree skiing, but also a spa with thermal hot springs born of the Chillán volcano that looms above. One of the three hotels at the resort, Hotel Termas de Chillán, indulges luxury-seeking skiers with Chile’s most sybaritic slope-side experience.

But while you might encounter a human mogul here and there at the hotel bar or in the outdoor pool, you won’t find many on the hill. There are hardly any moguls in Chile, despite plenty of steep terrain that would seem to breed them. “Fewer South Americans ski off the groomed terrain,” explains Harms, who has been instructing and guiding in Chile for 20 years. “And the few moguls we do have are more user-friendly — they’re more uniform since they’ve been made by better skiers. Because the Chilean ski areas don’t have the bed base for huge crowds, they simply don’t get the traffic to make the moguls unfriendly.”

On big-snow mornings, that same stick-to-the-groomers phenomenon, combined with the South American ski culture’s tendency to stay out late and sleep in, makes for a powder skier’s fantasy.

“The fight for first chair is nonexistent,” says David Owen, director of PowderQuest,\* a guide service that runs ski tours in both North and South America. “It always takes our North American guests a few days to realize we don’t have to be out there at 7 a.m. in a big line to get the fresh turns. The chairs tend to open later, then stay open until 4:30 or 5:30 p.m., due to the later sunsets we get here. Even when there is a crowd, there’s so much off-piste terrain that fresh tracks can stick around for days on end after a storm.”

A friendly vibe, endless terrain, no crowds, powder that lasts for days — *no moguls* — what’s keeping North American skiers from flocking to Chile in droves?

In a word: summer. During the South American ski season — the “austral winter” that runs from June to October — buckling up their Nordicas couldn’t be further from the minds of most North Americans. But that too contributes to Chile’s appeal.

“For the American skiers who do come, if they’re skiing in July or August, they’re committed to the sport, it doesn’t matter their level,” says Harms. “And the South Americans who are there — the Brazilians, the Argentines, the Chileans — they’re intoxicated with the sport of skiing. People are there to have fun; there’s no



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GRANT GUNDERSON; OPPOSITE, FROM TOP: COURTESY VALLE NEVADO; BUDDY MAYS/PHOTOGRAPHERS DIRECT

self-consciousness, no attitude. I've seen the most high-end, demanding American come and just give into the experience after a day. You can't help it."

It helps, too, that Chile offers a decidedly modern experience — one that is perhaps unique in the ski world, and can't help but be appreciated by American skiers: Spending nights in a country's cosmopolitan capital city\* and skiing its untouched wilderness by day.

Santiago is just an hour's drive — or better yet, a 10-minute helicopter flight — to many ski areas. At Harms' recently launched private heli-skiing service, Elevated Skiing,\* clients stay in Santiago at the Ritz-Carlton, the Hyatt, the W, or the Marriott, all of which have helipads on their rooftops or very nearby. After spending the night in five-star luxury at the more restful elevation of 1,700 feet (versus the 9,000-foot heights of the ski resorts), guests gear up in the morning, then take the elevator to the rooftop to find a helicopter and guide awaiting them.

Having a dedicated helicopter allows for flights of fancy in the most literal sense. "One day, for example, we did 50,000 vertical feet of heli-skiing," Harms recalls. "Then we flew to a lodge on the Maipo River, where there were tables set up with wine and a cordero a la Christo — filleted lamb cooked on an open spit. After an hour-long feast, we flew back to Santiago, landed at the hotel, relaxed, cleaned up, and had dinner later that night at one of the city's best sushi restaurants. On off days, we can fly guests down the coast to visit wineries or go horseback riding."

For purists, though, the heart of Chilean skiing is and always will be Portillo, host of the 1966 World Cup ski race, the only one ever held below the equator (French star Jean-Claude Killy won the downhill and combined). Then in 1978, Steve McKinney broke the 200 kilometer-per-hour speed barrier there, further mythologizing Portillo in the minds of North American skiers.

"I worked there for 20 seasons," says Toni Sponar, who came to Chile to ski in 1961 and now runs Ski Arpa,\* an adventure cat-skiing operation. "It's compact and has every type of terrain, but the jewel is the Hotel Portillo itself. It's like a cruise ship embedded in snow."

Indeed, in discussing Chilean skiing with anyone, it is the Hotel Portillo\* that is held up and revered in the most Shangri-La-like terms. "[Entering] the Hotel Portillo is like stepping back in time," says Harms. "People act in ladylike and gentlemanly fashions, they get dressed up for dinner. It's the only ski area in the world I've traveled to where I have to bring seven nice outfits — we note it on our clients' 'to-bring' list. It represents the essence of skiing. The sport isn't classist but,

for me, it's supposed to be classy. The Hotel Portillo has that, and skiing in Chile has that."

Regardless of how one chooses to indulge in the Chilean ski experience, it all comes down — as it rightly should — to a breathtaking moment in the mountains. When asked to describe it to someone who only knows North American and European skiing, Sponar puts it this way: "When you have a country as narrow as Chile, with a long coastline, and you can drive from the beach to a ski resort in only three hours, or look east from the top of Alto del Arpa and see Aconcagua [the highest peak in the Americas] at 7,000 meters, then turn toward the west and look out over the Pacific — how could I possibly compare this with anything else?" ●

A natural Chilean friendliness has lately been coupled with luxury on an international scale, so the rooms and meals at the bottom of the hill are no longer the price one pays for a day of epic riding.

