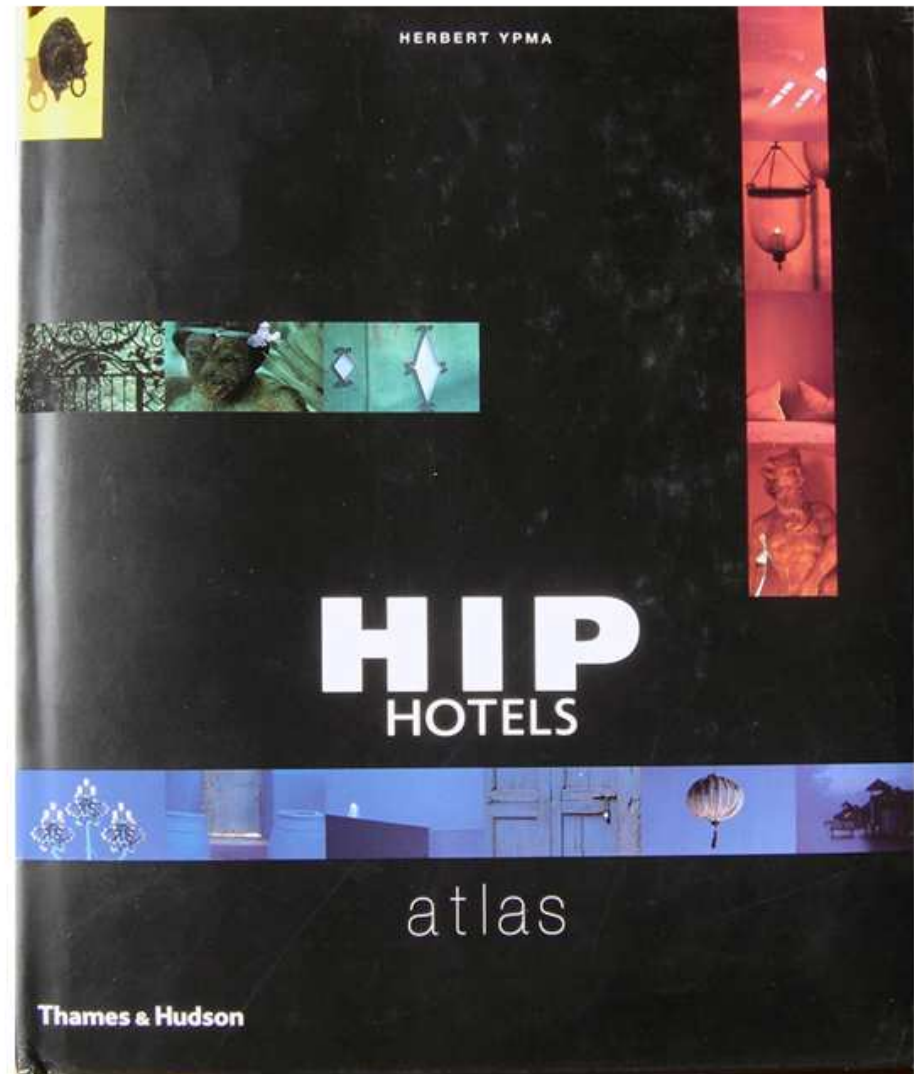


HIP HOTELS ATLAS
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explora atacama

The Atacama is the driest desert on earth. Situated at 2,500 to 3,000 metres altitude, it's in the northeast corner of Chile, 25 miles from the border of Bolivia and 90 miles from Argentina. The Spanish conquistadors, spurred on by tales of silver and gold, tried three times to get to this inhospitable part of South America. The first two times they all died.

Remote, wild, inaccessible, intimidating, Atacama is, in a word, perfect for Explora. As far as San Pedro de Atacama is concerned, the more remote the better. A businessman, entrepreneur, industrialist and soon of a successful Chilean family, he invented a new way to travel when he founded Explora in 1994. He and friends – photographers, artists, musicians, creative types – had all been inventing the direction travel and tourism seemed to have taken. They hated the queues, the overcrowding, the rancid tour buses. Basking by the pool or vegetating on a beach was not their idea of traveling. Thus, Explora was created as a counter-cultural alternative – to rediscover, as per the company slogan, “the art of travel”.

Words, of course, are easy but Pedro Ischer also put his money behind his imagination. It's not often you find someone who is fearless and who also has deep pockets.

But that's exactly what Explora Atacama benefits from. That, and some amazing locations.

It's true that it takes some commitment to get to San Pedro de Atacama, but it's worth it as few places on this planet are. Atacama may be a high desert but it's certainly not barren, in the sense of devoid of beauty. San Pedro, in fact, is an oasis – a splash of unexpected green amidst a wondrous landscape of sand dunes, gorges, canyons, rock formations, dry salt beds, geysers, flamingo marshes and hot springs ... all of it framed by a monumental row of snow-capped, 6,000-metre-high volcanoes. If you're thinking that it sounds like a setting for the next instalment of Star Wars, you're not far off. High on top of the 5,000-metre peak of Licancabur, the nearest volcano to San Pedro de Atacama, NASA maintains a top secret (well, not that secret, obviously) research station, where they carry out experiments in environments that closely resemble the landscape of Mars.

I admit the place took me completely by surprise – on two levels. First, I had expected a lunar landscape, a great stretch of dry, flat nothingness spreading to infinity. Instead, the geography and geology are so breathtaking I took me twice as long as it should have done to get from Calama

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airport to San Pedro because I kept stopping to take photographs. Second, I had not expected a hotel of such uncompromising contemporaneity, or on such a scale.

Inspired by the cattle haciendas of Mexico and South America, Explora is a 42-acre complex that combines cutting-edge architecture with traditional pueblo colours. Despite the linear geometry of its modernism, the complex is not out of place in San Pedro, partly because its simple wooden and rattan furniture retains an element of ethnic handcraft. Indeed Explora could be a working hacienda – and it is, except that here the work is adventure.

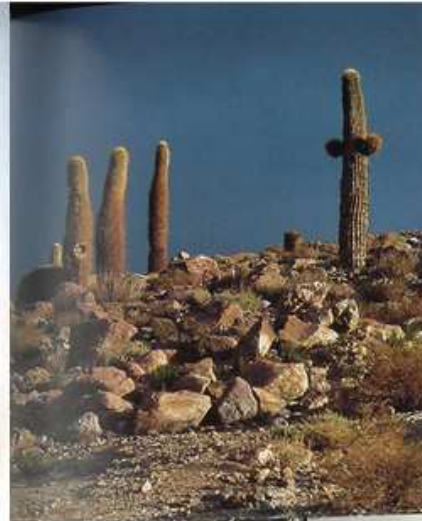
If you're at the hotel at any time other than breakfast, lunch or dinner, something is wrong. The list of places to explore and things to do is so extensive you're unlikely to do everything unless you're staying for a month. You can, for example, take one of Explora's fleet of four-wheel drives up an old mining road to a hot spring oasis hidden in a

narrow stone canyon at an altitude of 3,500 metres; take the horses for a trek through the dunes; head out on mountain bikes to the flamingo reserve; hike to the high Andes border of Bolivia; climb a volcano; walk into the picturesque but authentic centre of San Pedro.... The adventures are limited only by your time and your ability.

For all its outdoor options and bold architecture, this Explora is also an extremely good hotel, in the old-fashioned sense. The food is very fine, the wine list surprisingly sophisticated, the service impeccable. Even the most demanding 'princess' would be hard-pressed to find something to complain about, except perhaps saddle sores.

Inspiring design, extraterrestrial landscapes and compelling adventure, with the odd sprinkling of danger, Explora Atacama is the perfect place if you've ever dreamed of being Cei-Wan Kenobi. In this desert, the force is definitely with you.

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room rates from US \$2,000 (4 nights, including meals, transfers and activities)



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