

NEW HOTEL DESIGN  
OTTO RIEWOLDT

204 207 : EXPLORA EN ATACAMA

2002  
LAURENCE KING PUBLISHING  
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#### Explora en Atacama

San Pedro, Chile  
1998

Architecture/Interior design: German del Sol

SAN Pedro has long been an oasis. It was probably 3,000 years ago that South American Indians founded the first settlement on the eastern edge of the Atacama desert, marking the furthest point of penetration by the meltwaters of the Andes. And it was the Spaniard Francisco de Aguirre – the notorious conquistador whose Amazonian exploits were immortalized by film-maker Werner Herzog – who inflicted defeat on the nearby Indian fortress of Quintero in 1540, with thirty armoured horsemen. What followed – the boom era of the saltpetre mines in the 19th century and the exploitation up to the present day of vast copper deposits – largely bypassed the little town of San Pedro set at an altitude of more than 2,500 metres (8,200 feet).

San Pedro remained a sleepy place until a few years ago, when it became a favourite haunt of drop-outs fleeing contemporary civilization – after which some of the more adventurous independent tourists began to find their way there, too. Its remote location and the archaeological museum established there by the former Jesuit priest Gustave Le Paige are not the only attractions of the town. San Pedro is also ideally located for the Tatio geysers, the flamingo colonies of the huge salt lake called Salar de Atacama and the bizarre Moon Valley. So it is no coincidence that the second Explora hotel designed by the Chilean architect German del Sol was built in San Pedro; his first project was in the far south of Chile, on Lago Puyehue in the Torres del Paine national park, in the cold of Patagonia.

The fact that the Explora is located away from the centre of San Pedro offers clues to its exotic character. Del Sol avoids unimaginative borrowings from traditional local styles. The white, telescoped volumes of the irregular lozenge-shaped ground plan, surmounted by irregular copper-covered roofs, may seem the epitome of modernism, but they also have contextual relevance.



left  
Broken lines and intertwined volumes: the Explora en Atacama hotel is a unique and strong architectural statement.

opposite  
Beat the heat: protruding roofs and shading fences create relaxing and ambient outdoor spaces.

'Architecture in Atacama is challenged to get strength out of weakness, and joy out of the essentials...to relate the hotel with the culture of the place, the trembling beauty of its arts and crafts...like wrinkles in an interesting face,' says del Sol. 'Architecture may capture the grace of ruins that everyone interprets at will, the vagueness of broken line walls that enclose the space gently, because their forms are determined by real needs of life, not by abstract certainties.'

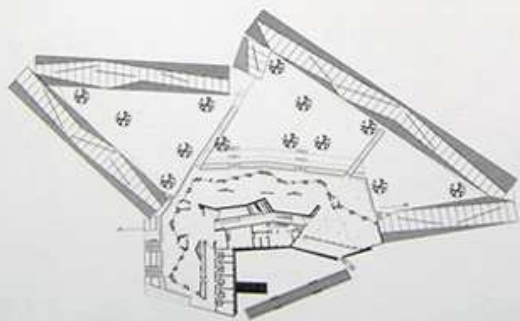
Around the main building, which houses the hotel's restaurant, bar and lounge, are the lower guest wings, with 52 rooms. This capacity will soon double on completion of a second phase of construction. Del Sol also designed the stables near the hotel. This desert hideaway cost about US \$15 million – and must attract an affluent clientele in order to repay such an investment. Some of the ageing hippies who have settled in San Pedro fear an invasion by the jet set. The occasional member of Europe's glittering aristocracy has already been spotted in the Explora. But, if San Pedro managed to survive Aguirre, it will surely be able to cope with Camilla Parker-Bowles & Co.



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100  
Water in the driest place  
on earth: pool pavilion of  
the Explora en Atacama  
resort.

101  
Site plan of the hotel  
complex, showing the  
sculptured roofscape of  
the different wings.

102  
Deconstructed forms:  
skylight and fireplace  
form irregular shapes,  
which are a dominant  
feature of Explora en  
Atacama's architecture.

