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Gateway to Andes: Lakes, Backpackers and an Easy Vibe



Victor Ruiz Caballero for The New York Times

The view of snowcapped Mount Villarrica from Pucón.

By LARRY ROHTER
Published: July 15, 2007

Correction Appended

[PATAGONIA](#) gets all the attention and renown, but the lake district just to its north has always been one of [Chile's](#) most beautiful regions. In recent years, the area has also become increasingly accessible, as Chile's fast-growing economy has transformed the once-sleepy and staid resort town of Pucón, at the east end of Lago Villarrica, into an Andean version of Aspen.

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Pucón, Chile

In the language of the Mapuche-Pehuenche Indians who dominated the region before the first European settlers arrived in 1883, Pucón means "entrance to the mountains." With all the hotels, condos and restaurants going up around town, Pucón now plays its traditional role in more luxurious fashion, serving as a gateway both to the lake district that stretches southward for 150 miles to Puerto Montt and to the snow-capped volcanoes that form a magnificent backdrop to those expanses of water and forest.

This is not the tropics, however: Pucón, population 14,500, is nearly 40 degrees below the equator, about as far south as [New York City](#) is north. That means the

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Victor Ruiz Caballero for The New York Times
Tourists and boats at the city's pier.

seasons and the weather change markedly, and Pucón with them, offering visitors a very different set of attractions at different times of year.

During the Southern Hemisphere summer, December through March, the main focus is the lake itself and the rivers that feed it. The beach in front of the venerable [Gran Hotel Pucón](#) is so crowded then that, as Chileans like to say, “the only way to get a spot is if someone dies.” For more active types, there is also boating, jet skiing and water skiing and sport [fishing](#).

But during the winter season that is just now beginning and continues until September, Pucón turns into a major ski area, centered around Mount Villarrica, an active volcano visible all over town and just a few miles to the south. Halfway up the mountain, at the 4,700-foot mark,

is a lodge called Centro de Esqui Villarrica, which, for 18,000 pesos a day (about \$34 at 536 pesos to the dollar), provides five or six lifts to trails of varying degrees of difficulty, as well as snowboarding and [hiking](#) trails.

At night, the restaurants, bars and clubs along Calle Fresia, the main drag, come alive. The cuisine is varied: in addition to the salmon and trout dishes that one would expect in a place so closely tied to lakes and rivers, there are plenty of restaurants specializing in Italian, Spanish, Uruguayan barbecue and even Pan-Asian food.

Since Pucón was largely developed by German and Swiss families with names like Gudenschwager and Holzapfel, a Teutonic influence on cuisine is also quite noticeable. Though few diners are willing to brave eating outdoors during the winter season, when warmer weather comes, one favorite local pastime is to while away part of the day at a sidewalk cafe with a plate of locally made kuchen, and an espresso or pisco sour, Chile's national drink.

There is even a casino, adjoining the luxury [Hotel del Lago](#), that functions all through the night. If that makes Pucón sound uncomfortably like [Las Vegas](#), never fear: the vibe throughout town is easygoing and informal, geared more toward backpackers than high rollers, and far less stuffy or celebrity-obsessed than in Bariloche, the rival Argentine ski resort on the other side of the Andes that is a traditional favorite of moneyed South Americans.

In fact, whoever invented the phrase “the great outdoors” must have had Pucón in mind. The town is awash in outfitters that offer [canoeing](#), [kayaking](#), hiking, rafting, mountain [biking](#), rappelling and horseback riding, either as day trips or as multiday excursions; almost all such agencies have employees who speak English.

Pucón also makes a wonderful jumping-off point to explore other lakes, including Calafquén and Panguipulli, both an hour's drive to the south. My favorite, though, is the quieter, isolated Caburgua, about 20 miles northeast of Pucón, where last December I spent a relaxing morning watching separate groups of vacationing Chilean high school students and German tourists trying to master the paddleboats that are for rent on the lake's southern shore.

Chileans have traditionally flocked to Pucón to take advantage of the many hot springs just east of town, and foreign travelers are now also embracing that habit. The [Termas los Pozones](#), for example, has a following among younger visitors, especially those on a budget: it is open 24 hours, and at 3,500 pesos per person for a day, a visit costs nearly half the price of some of its competitors. All six of its natural pools are often filled late at night

The [Termas de Huife](#) is the more sedate, upscale choice, offering three pools of different temperatures, as well as [spa](#) and massage services in tasteful wood-paneled cabins;



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there is also a hotel on the premises. But for me the charm of the place is best found during a daytime soak, when it is possible to search the sky for the condors that occasionally hover above the nearby forest and listen to the rushing waters of the Rio Liucura, just a stone's throw away.

The area's main attraction, though, is probably [Villarrica National Park](#), which sprawls eastward along Highway 199 to the border with [Argentina](#). The 230-square-mile park, crisscrossed by hiking trails, encompasses a pair of imposing volcanoes: one that shares its name with the park and the lake, and Quetrupillán, which is smaller and harder to reach because it is along the park's more isolated southern flank.

Mount Villarrica was known to the Mapuches as Rucapillán, or the Devil's Lair, and remains an active volcano. Its last major eruption occurred in 1971, sending a nine-mile flow of lava through forests and rivers. Plumes of smoke can be seen wafting from Rucapillán's crater with some frequency, recalling the respectful words of the poet Alonso de Ercilla, who trekked through the region in the mid-1500s as part of the first Spanish expedition to explore the lake district:

*Great neighbor volcano
Known as Vulcan's forge
that belches ceaseless fire.*

1 | [2](#) | [NEXT PAGE »](#)

LARRY ROHTER is chief of The Times's bureau in Rio de Janeiro.

Correction: July 22, 2007

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(Page 2 of 2)

Locals say they worry about Mount Villarrica only when it is not letting off steam, because that means pressure for an eruption is building up inside. In fact, climbing the mountain's northern face is one of Pucón's most popular day trips. For about 27,000 pesos, or \$50, outfitters will organize groups and provide gear, a guide and transport to and from the ski lodge that is the starting point for the trek to the crater.

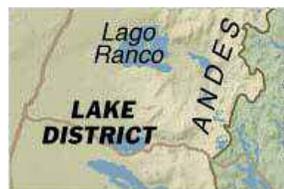
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Pucón, Chile

But my top choice, whether for hiking or just contemplation, is the smaller, quieter and more remote [Huerquehue National Park](#). The nine-mile road from Lago Caburgua will tax both your patience and the suspension on your car, but Huerquehue's charms become evident as soon as you start your trek, which is less grueling than the one up Mount Villarrica. The main trail winds its way up through stands of dense lenga and araucaria forest and past waterfalls to three small lakes, offering spectacular glimpses of the volcano and nearby Lago Tinquilco.

If Pucón's menu of activities sounds appealing, my last piece of advice is this: go now rather than later. In the six years that I've been visiting the lake district, I've noticed billboards for time-share condos appearing with greater frequency on the road to Pucón, along with construction of chalets and cabins on the slopes of some of the hills

that rise from Lago Villarrica. The threat of overdevelopment is quite real. But for now, Pucón is finally enjoying a well-deserved moment of glory.

VISITOR INFORMATION

Round-trip fares from Kennedy Airport in New York to Temuco, [Chile](#), start at around \$1,125, according to a recent Web search. From Temuco, the 55-mile bus trip to Pucón costs about 1,900 pesos, or about \$3.55 at 536 pesos to the dollar. You can rent a car in Temuco from about \$50 a day.

WHERE TO STAY

Hotels encourage foreign visitors to pay in United States dollars, which allows them to avoid paying a 19 percent value-added tax.

Generations of Chilean families have summered at the lakeside **Gran Hotel Pucón**

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(Clemente Holzapfel 190, 56-45-913-300; www.granhotelpucon.com), which has 145 rooms with views of either the lake or the Villarrica volcano. Double rooms range from \$110 a night in the low season to \$215 in the high season, breakfast included.

About a mile out of town is the [Hotel Antumalal](http://www.antumalal.com) (56-45-441-011; www.antumalal.com), a 20-room Bauhaus beauty with a lovely hillside garden, winding paths and waterfalls. Doubles start at \$115 in the low season and \$224 in the high season, including breakfast.

Major hotels all have their own dining rooms. At the Antumalal, for instance, the menu brings European finesse to fish and other Chilean ingredients; dinner for two with Chilean wine runs about 37,500 pesos.

In town, Calle Fresia is lined with restaurants of almost every imaginable type. [Puerto Pucón y Tequila](http://www.puconytequila.com) (Fresia 246; 56-45-441-592) has Spanish and Portuguese seafood dishes.

For kuchen, strudel and other German delicacies, try the [Holzapfel Backerei](http://www.holzapfelbackerei.com) (Clemente Holzapfel 524; 56-45-443-546).

EXCURSIONS

The ski lodge and runs on Mount Villarrica are owned by the Gran Hotel Pucón, and skiing arrangements can be made in the lobby. There are also numerous agencies around town that can make those arrangements and organize other trips, including an ascent of the volcano. One good place to start is [Politur](http://www.politur.com), at O'Higgins 635; (56-45) 441-373; www.politur.com. Its rates may be a bit higher than some competitors', but it's reliable.

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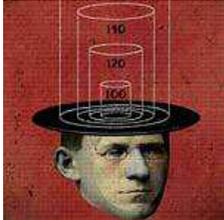
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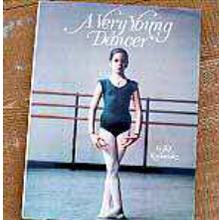
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