

Norte Chico



Caught between the ocean and the Andes, Chile's Norte Chico, or Little North, is unique unto itself. Gone are the vast open spaces of the desolate Atacama Desert to the north, and the lush valleys and mountains of the south are still but a whispered fantasy. This is a land in transition. Heading down from Norte Grande, the harsh desert landscape begins to yield signs of life: a cactus here, a scrub brush there. Then finally, you hit one of the many chartreuse river valleys, a welcome sight in a land rough-hewn in browns and grays. And while Norte Chico may hold less attraction than the big sights to the south, there's a lilting air of blue-skied desert mysticism that keeps your attention.

La Serena, a coastal colonial capital, is the largest city in the region and a must-see for anybody visiting. From there is the Elqui Valley, home to Chile's pisco production, new-age communes and cutting-edge observatories. And further north are some amazing national parks, muscle-bound mining towns, and mile upon mile of uncharted coastline just waiting for you to set up camp or charge out for an afternoon surf. Wildlife lovers won't want to miss the playful penguins of Reserva Nacional Pingüino de Humboldt and Parque Nacional Pan de Azúcar. And high in the Andes, the seldom-visited Parque Nacional Nevado Tres Cruces is a great place to spot vicuña and flamingos. It would seem that despite its diminutive moniker, the little north is just a bit bigger, and just a bit badder, than most people thought.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Bop through the colonial center of **La Serena** (p244), then head to the beach for surf, sun and sand
- Learn just how potent the little pisco grape can be as you hop from village to village in the ever-so-groovy **Elqui Valley** (p252), stopping for nighttime stargazing at the **Observatorio Comunal Cerro Mamalluca** (p255)
- Get lost on your way to the high-Andean lagoons of **Parque Nacional Nevado Tres Cruces** (p240)
- Bounce your way out to the penguin colonies at **Reserva Nacional Pingüino de Humboldt** (p243) on a tiny skiff, passing dolphins, sea lions and otters
- Find your own way as you pioneer campsites and surf spots in the beachfront **Parque Nacional Pan de Azúcar** (p233)



■ POPULATION: 888,803

■ AREA: 115,755 SQ KM

■ ELEVATION: 0-6893M

History

While later civilizations would find the harsh mountains and semidesert of Norte Chico difficult to tame, pre-Columbian peoples, like the coastal Chango fisherfolk, thrived here. Sedentary Diaguita farmers, who crossed the Andes from what is now Argentina, also found a fruitful niche, raising crops in fertile river valleys and even parts of the barren uplands. Shortly before the conquistadores limped onto the Chilean scene, the Inka empire also began to spread its tentacles south.

The Europeans found forays into Chile infinitely harder. Diego de Almagro's first fateful expedition crossed the freezing Paso San Francisco from Salta (now Argentina) in 1535. Surviving phenomenal hardship, a member of Almagro's party left a graphic, gruesome account of the group's miserable 800km march over the Puna de Atacama, reporting that men and horses froze to death and that members of later expeditions, finding the undecomposed horses, 'were glad to eat them.'

Food and water were available in the lowlands, but Almagro soon scurried back to present-day Peru via Norte Grande. A few years later Pedro de Valdivia's party followed Almagro's return route south to found Santiago, but they met stiff resistance from indigenous warriors at Copiapó; of one party of 30 that Valdivia had ordered back to Cuzco, only two officers survived.

Valdivia founded Copiapó in 1540 and La Serena in 1541. Copiapó lagged behind until its 18th-century gold rush. And when gold failed, silver took its place and Copiapó boomed, tripling its population to 12,000 after a bonanza strike at Chañarillo in 1832.

Silver mining declined by the late 19th century, but copper soon replaced it. The area around La Serena and Bahía Inglesa subsequently underwent tourist booms, and the Copiapó, Huasco and Elqui Valleys boosted Chile's upsurge in fruit exports and pisco production, but mining continues to be the dominant breadwinner.

Climate

South of the Atacama Desert, Norte Chico is a semiarid transition zone to the central valley's Mediterranean-like climate. Though the region sees only infrequent rain, especially in the northern reaches, its coastline is often cloaked with a moisture-rich ocean fog, known locally as *camanchaica*. For climate charts, see p464.

Getting There & Away

The Panamericana wiggles its way along Norte Chico's coastline, making it easy to reach by car or bus. There are also busy domestic airports near La Serena and Copiapó.

Getting Around

Turning off the Panamericana can quickly feel like venturing into the outback as gravel and dirt roads deteriorate rapidly and public transportation quickly dwindles. As a result, getting to many out-of-the-way national parks and attractions can be tricky without taking a tour or having your own wheels, and in some cases only high-clearance pickup trucks or 4WDs will do.

CHAÑARAL

☎ 052 / pop 14,978

Woebegone Chañaral is a cheerless mining and fishing port set among the rugged headlands of the Sierra de las Animas. Its principal appeal to travelers is as a jumping-off point to the popular coastal Parque Nacional Pan de Azúcar, which straddles the border between Regiones II and III.

Chañaral dates from 1833, after Diego de Almeyda discovered copper reserves nearby; the town's livelihood still depends on copper – now from the enormous El Salvador mine in the interior. El Salvador has been a mixed blessing to Chañaral, however, befouling it with toxic waste. Chile's Environmental Health Service even considered moving the entire town to escape the arsenic-contaminated beach and polluted air. A vigorous clean-up has somewhat ameliorated the situation; ex-president Ricardo Lagos even took a swim here in 2003, but environmentalists still raise an eyebrow over the beach's safety. There's a public pool right in front of the beach for those not wanting to have three-legged babies.

Orientation & Information

About 165km northwest of Copiapó, Chañaral has two distinct sections: the industrial port sprawling along the shoreline and the Panamericana, and a residential zone scaling the hills. Merino Jarpa is the main commercial drag.

Centro de Llamadas (Merino Jarpa 505; ☎ 9am–10pm) Long-distance telephone office and internet.

Post office (Comercio s/n; ☎ 8:30am–6pm Mon–Fri) Located at the west end of town.