

# Norte Grande



Devil dusts zoom wantonly through the vast wasteland of the Atacama Desert, spinning dirt high into the air like an inverted waterfall. It's as if Pachamama, the earth goddess herself, decided to take back her creation and start anew in this sun-scorched land of dust, dirt and decay. But Chile's Norte Grande – with its undulating curves of rock and stone, Andean lagoons, snow-capped volcanoes, salt flats and sensuously perforated coastline – is here to stay.

Famous as much for its hilltop observatories as for its massive copper mines and high prices, Norte Grande is not for everyone. It holds less visceral appeal than many of the high-profile stops to the south and is quite expensive to get around. But there's just something about those vast, uninhabited spaces that seems to touch the soul and the imagination, and many travelers say there's simply no better place.

The star attraction of El Norte Grande is the tiny adobe village of San Pedro de Atacama. Ideally situated just a day trip away from the world's highest geyser field and some astounding desert formations, San Pedro has become Chile's number-one tourist draw in recent years.

But there's more to Norte Grande than San Pedro. Go for lung-bursting, jaw-dropping adventure in the high-altitude reserves of Parque Nacional Lauca and Parque Nacional Volcán Isluga, spend a week perfecting your tan on the beaches outlying old nitrate ports like Iquique and Pisagua, or make your own adventure in the lost ghost towns and hard-sprung mining centers that make this region unique.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Illuminate the past as you marvel at the expressive masks of the oldest mummies in the world at the **Museo Arqueológico San Miguel de Azapa** (p185)
- Test your lungs as you visit the Andean villages and high-altitude lagoons of **Parque Nacional Lauca** (p189)
- Charge the big breaks of **Iquique** (p194) by day, sipping pisco sours by night in this charming nitrate-era town
- Leave the tourist trail behind, visiting the rural communities around **San Pedro de Atacama** (boxed text, p217)
- Spot llama and vicuña on the way to **El Tatio** (p221), the highest geyser field in the world



■ POPULATION: 922,578

■ AREA: 185,148 SQ KM

■ ELEVATION: 0-6700 M

## History

The past seems to be repeating itself in Norte Grande, playing over and over again like a heavy dub beat. It's a story of ecstatic booms and woeful busts, of resplendent pre-Columbian cultures fighting for survival in a dry, desolate land, and – like all of history – it's a tale of greed and pride, of subsistence and gluttony, of war and hard-won peace.

Despite its distance from Santiago, the region has always played a strong role in Chile's political and economic arenas, thanks mostly to the vast mineral wealth sitting just below the rocky surface. And even with its extreme desert aridity, it has sustained humans for many thousands of years.

The earliest culture to leave its mark was the Chinchorro, famous for its extraordinary burial practices (boxed text, p186). Coastal Changó peoples also fished from inflatable sealskin canoes and hunted guanaco here in pre-Columbian times. Far into the desert, irrigated agricultural practices adopted from the Tiwanku culture, which had its power center near Lake Titicaca in present-day Bolivia, sustained the Atacameño people who lived in oases near Calama and San Pedro de Atacama. These cultures – along with the Inka, who enjoyed a brief reign here from 1470 till the time of conquest – left impressive fortresses, agricultural terraces and huge stylized designs or geoglyphs on hillsides. Representations of llama trains still decorate the same valleys that served as pre-Columbian pack routes from cordillera to coast.

The indigenous populations were largely subdued during the conquest, which took place in the later part of the 16th century, with the Spaniards implementing the *encomienda* system, by which the Crown granted individual Spaniards rights to indigenous labor and tribute, and establishing ports in the coastal towns of Arica, Pisagua and Iquique. But pockets of independent Changos remained, and the area wasn't substantially resettled until large deposits of 'white gold' – nitrate (saltpeter) – brought the first boom to the region in the 1810s.

Interestingly, this part of the country was not actually Chilean until the late 19th century. It was claimed rather by Peru and Bolivia. However, that all changed with the pivotal War of the Pacific (1879–84), which was provoked by treaty disputes, the presence of thousands of Chilean workers in Bolivian

mines, and Bolivian attempts to increase taxation on mineral exports. Within five years, Chile took control of the staggeringly important copper- and nitrate-rich land.

However Chileans were not the only ones to reap the benefits. Foreign prospectors had been sniffing around for some time, and moved quickly to capitalize on Chilean land gains. Beneficiaries included British speculator John Thomas North, who went on to take control of the railroads and more or less dominate the region's postwar economy.

The nitrate boom was uniquely explosive here. Nitrate *oficinas* (company towns) such as Humberstone flourished in the early 20th century and became bubbles of energy and profit in the lifeless desert. Large port cities such as Antofagasta and Iquique also began to flourish. However, the swift rise of the industry would be followed by a sharp fall. New petroleum-based fertilizers were devised in Europe and the nitrate-mining industry withered, exposing Chile's crippling dependence upon its revenue.

The nitrate bust drove the nation to near bankruptcy, and scores of creepy 19th- and 20th-century nitrate ghost towns now pockmark both sides of the Panamericana. Luckily for Chile, Norte Grande had another trump card up its sleeve – copper. Vast veins of this valuable resource sprang to the country's rescue and still keep it afloat today, especially with copper prices soaring. One of the world's largest open-pit copper mines, at Chuquibambilla, is just one of many vast mines honeycombing the region. But with the boom came a slew of unique, modern problems, including environmental degradation, higher prices, overcrowding and pollution.

The region's rich pickings have at times acted as a kind of political smokescreen; the steady flow of revenue allowed Chilean politicians to postpone dealing with major social and political issues until well into the 20th century.

Militant trade unions also first developed in the north, during the late 19th and early 20th century, and introduced a powerful new factor into Chilean politics.

## Climate

The Atacama is the most 'perfect' of deserts. Some coastal stations have never recorded measurable rainfall, although infrequent El Niño events can bring brief but phenomenal