

SKIING IN CHILIE - Rochelle Lash

PORTILLO, Chile – Devoted skiers and snowboarders crave thrilling slopes and exceptional snow all year-'round, and the epic Andes Mountains of Chile have heaps of both.

In the reversed seasons of South America, ski areas in Chile are blessed with as much as seven metres of mostly light powder snow from June to early October. Skiers and boarders who need a winter fix while Montreal is sweltering in summer can hop a plane to Santiago, Chile's modern capital city and the gateway to the Chilean Andes.

Having precious white stuff underfoot is the common factor, but skiing or riding in southern hemisphere areas such as Portillo, Valle Nevado or Termas de Chillan is an adventure and incalculably different than skiing "up north." On the slopes, the snow bowls are so stark and vast you might have only a condor for company. Back at the bar, Andes après-ski is no less challenging. The national cocktail is the pisco sour, made with a grape brandy that's 40-per-cent alcohol.

I learned to snowplow on a slope in the Laurentians little bigger than a driveway, so I needed all my courage – and then some-- for my first run in the Andes. When Portillo's spine-tingling high-speed quad chairlift swooped upwards over the steep jagged mountain cornices, I held onto my Swiss instructor in a state of terror. That was only the first step. The daunting prospect of making first tracks down steep pitches through deep powder was looming.

As intimidating as the Andes are, the downhill areas in Chile have about two-thirds of their slopes groomed for intermediates. Advanced skiers head for the steep, dare-devil couloirs and forbidding bumps of Portillo's Roca Jack area where Jean-Claude Killy won the first world championship race held in South America 40 years ago.

Perhaps the most compelling experiences for expert skiers and boarders in Chile are the helicopter and off-piste skiing through deep virgin powder in sweeping mountain bowls and heart-stopping chutes. Add to the rush of rocketing downhill, the overwhelming beauty of the towering glaciers and mountains, including Aconcagua, the highest summit outside of the Himalayas. (EDITOR, JUST FYI ,--more than 6,900 meters).

The statistics that we use to define Quebec's areas are almost meaningless in the nearly immeasurable Andes. Portillo has a seemingly modest vertical drop of 836 metres, with groomed, skiable terrain of 1,235 acres and 12 lifts, but so what? Our close neighbour, Mont-Sainte-Anne, boasts a loosely comparable 625-metre vertical, 450 acres and 13 lifts, but the numbers are misleading.

Toss out the stats and factor in the staggering scope of the Andes, with the cosmic effect of open, above-the-tree-line bowls, the extraordinary length of the lifts and trails and the seemingly limitless off-piste terrain. The altitude alone is both terrifying and exhilarating. Don't look down – in Portillo you'll be at an elevation of 3,322 metres for lift-serviced trails and up to 4,300 metres for helicopter skiing. (THAT'S 2006 INFO).

"It's easy to underestimate the sheer magnitude of the mountains from the trail map or the web site," says Canadian Matt Wylie, a top heli-skiing guide in Portillo who has worked for the renowned Mike Weigele in British Columbia. "Even when you're looking up from the base, the Andes seem within reach and manageable... but it's only when you're skiing that you get hit with the awesome scope of it all."

How big is big? In Valle Nevado, the trail network connects with two neighboring areas, El Colorado and La Parva, for a staggering total of 22,000 acres of terrain (compared to 628 acres at Mont Tremblant in Quebec or about 7,800 acres at the combined Rocky Mountain trio of Banff-Lake Louise-Sunshine Village.) PARAGRAPH

In Chile, there are no lift lines – ever – and you have the slopes almost to yourself. Portillo's sprawling bowl is open to only 450 hotel guests and a handful of day skiers, so it's like a cozy private club skiing the Milky Way. Compared that to, for example, Whistler-Blackcomb where the lift capacity is nearly 60,000 people per hour or even tiny Mont-Saint-Sauveur which ferries 15,000 an hour uphill.

Chile's ski areas are easily manageable, on and off the slopes. Travelers are well taken care of by hotel and airport staffs who mostly speak English. Transfers to ski areas are handled smoothly and once there, the system of lessons for children and adults is a handy, secure way to tour the vast mountains. Still, skiing Chile can be a chilling escapade -- the kind of travel for which you have to read the fine print about what to do if there's an avalanche or the access road is closed due to a heavy snowfall. Don't despair if you're snowed in. The hotels store a three-month supply of food and drink and cut their rates if you're snowed in. All you'd have to do is ride the fresh powder. PARAGRAPH

South American areas are fully developed resorts featuring cocktail-hour entertainment, fitness facilities, fine cuisine, movies, day care and kids' and teens' activities.

Ski Portillo, Valle Nevado and Termas de Chillán all have hotels in at least three price ranges, serving backpackers, families and upscale travelers. The 50-year-old Hotel Portillo is an intimate, wood-paneled hotel nestled in a remote valley high in the Andes. It has both the romance and family values of a vintage ski lodge as well as the all-inclusive camaraderie of a cruise ship in the mountains. Next door to the hotel are two small, lower-budget lodges, the Inca and the Octagon, whose guests have access to all of Portillo's resort facilities.

Valle Nevado, less than 20 years old, is a growing complex that can accommodate about 1,500 people in three contemporary glass-and-wood hotels and two apartment buildings, all with fabulous views of mountains and valleys. The lodges cluster around a mini-mall of ski shops, lounges and restaurants, French and Italian among them. Travelers can combine a trip to Portillo and Valle Nevado with a transfer in Santiago. Termas de Chillan requires an additional one-hour flight from Santiago to Concepcion, and then an approximately three-hour car ride. PARAGRAPH

Termas de Chillan is an established year-'round golf and ski resort town that has grown up around natural hot springs. Although the lifts are a bit outdated and the mountains are at a lower altitude than Portillo or Valle Nevado, Chillan has great intermediate and advanced downhill skiing. The longest run in South America – 13 kilometres – meanders over Chillan's open slopes and cuts through a forest cloaked in relatively untouched powder.

Cross-country skiers can have a unique experience climbing the trails on the side of a dormant volcano. The après-ski here is tame. Chillan's visitors gather at the local Club House, an indoor swimming pool and social centre, as well as at the village's disco at night.