

Lured by record snowfalls in the Andes, **MARK LASSETER** checks out Ski Arpa's surreal desert views and nearly schusses into a hot spring at Termas de Chillan

Hip-deep in Chile powder

LAS TRANCAS, CHILE

We could no longer resist reports of record snowfalls in the Andes, so we packed our ski bags and booked a flight from Vancouver to Santiago.

Established Chilean resorts such as Termas de Chillan — and lesser-known powder havens including Ski Arpa — opened as early as May this year, having received more than 150 centimetres of snow. This kind of inundation hasn't happened in more than a decade, just about ensuring that many runs will remain open until late September this season.

At Santiago airport, my ski buddy Magali Roy hailed a taxi for the hour-long drive to the small town of Los Andes, one step closer to the Ski Arpa experience the two of us were craving. The owners of our rural accommodations — the beautifully restored Casa San Regis — showed us around the 19th-century hacienda and served us tender Chilean steaks and, of course, some fine local wine. Our plan was to ski two resorts in Chile that are off the mega-resort path, but still offer great terrain.

Early the next morning, after a traditional breakfast of bread, ham, cheese and eggs, we were picked up in an SUV by Brian Pearson, the American owner of the Santiago Adventures tour company. (A four-by-four vehicle is required to reach Ski Arpa, as the dirt access road is challenging to say the least.)

After an hour's drive, we were met by Ski Arpa owner Toni Sponar. Born in Austria, Sponar is in his late 60s but has the looks, attitude, enthusiasm and skiing ability of a twentysomething.

Two decades ago, he used the

money he had saved working for more than 35 years as a ski instructor in Aspen, Colo., to buy 4,000 hectares of land in the Chilean Andes from families and farmers. His dream was to run his own private ski resort, and to do what he loves on his own terms. Today, Ski Arpa's only lifts are two Sno-Cats — tank-like grooming machines with passenger cabins — that take skiers wherever they want to go on the mountain.

Jumping into the Sno-Cat 10 minutes after our arrival, we were excited to be heading up to about 3,500 metres in elevation — and about having an entire mountain to share among just five skiers: myself, Roy, Pearson, Sponar and Les Manley, a professional skier from Whistler, B.C. Because Ski Arpa is a bit of a trek, it's rarely crowded (call ahead on weekdays to make sure the Sno-Cats are running).

The views from the summit ridge were breathtaking, with the 6,962-metre peak of Aconcagua rising behind us as we began our descent. Just as spectacular was all the snow and terrain. We asked Sponar where we could go, and he replied: "Wherever you want."

Manley, Roy, Pearson and I all chose different routes, from steep pitches with chutes to wide-open bowls, but we were still able to meet up in the same area lower down on the mountain. The snow was a bit wind-blown, but there was definitely plenty of it, with more than three metres covering the slopes. And we could go as fast as we wanted with all that elbow room. After a long run over rolling terrain, we were picked up by the Snow-Cat again. It was time to go a bit higher for another run starting on a different ridge.

This time, we skied down *Avalancha*, Sponar's favourite. We



MAGALI ROY

Termas de Chillan's Poma and T-bar surface lifts make it possible to ski on the top of the mountain when it's too windy for chairlifts to operate. High-altitude options include skiing off-piste and jumping from cornices.

stayed on this ridge run all day — it yielded the deepest, fluffiest powder — and took in surreal views of the Los Andes desert in the background. After a great day, we headed back to Santiago to pick up a rental truck for the drive to our next stop.

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We arrived in the town of Las Trancas, near the Termas de Chillan ski resort, at about 3 a.m. Not surprisingly, no one was awake at the Las Trancas International Hostel/Lodge, and the front door was locked. So we pulled out our sleeping bags and down jackets, and made ourselves comfortable in our own "Casa de Nissan."

We were awakened four hours later by the hotel staff, who chided us for not waking them to let us in.

After breakfast, we set off to Termas de Chillan, a 10-minute drive up the road. From the top of the resort, 2,500 metres up, we were able to check out the infamous and expansive out-of-bounds terrain.

What's great about Termas de Chillan, compared with other South American ski resorts, is that it has Poma and T-bar surface lifts even in the high alpine, making it possible to ski on the top of the mountain when it's too windy for chairlifts to operate.

We headed off to the spacious and enticing Santa Maria area,

where we found great snow and jumped off plenty of wind-blown cornices. With the sunset fading over the resort, we milked our last run, skiing all the way to the resort village.

On Day 2, the El Fresco summit chairlift was closed in the morning because of high winds, so we decided to hike up a Sno-Cat track for some out-of-bounds skiing. On the trek, we met a friendly ex-pat French snowboarder named Bertrand Deschamps, and, using our Grade 10 French, managed to wrangle invitations to his lodge for dinner.

The hike also paid off with smooth first tracks, with Manley and I jumping off cornices, crossing skateboard-park-style bowls, and tackling some chutes and steeper cliff sections.

After another long run to the bottom, we decided to hike up to an area with small couloirs we had been eyeing since we arrived. An hour later, we donned our boards and schussed down a series of couloirs and chutes that yielded the best run of our stay.

At the end of the run, we narrowly avoided a 12-metre-wide hot spring, and made our way back to the resort. (Most of the out-of-bounds terrain in Termas de Chillan leads back to the resort and its clearly marked groomed runs.)

Before heading back to town, we

drove to the nearby natural hot springs in Valle Hermoso and soaked while enjoying a spectacular sunset.

Back at the hostel, we packed our bags for our early-morning departure, and then ventured into the woods off the main drag of Las Trancas to visit Bertrand Deschamps' Mission Impossible Lodge.

Bertrand and his wife built the beautiful wooden lodge last summer. It is nestled in a heavily forested area, but its huge windows and spacious deck provide views of the surrounding Shangri-la glacier and the two volcanoes of Chillan Viejo and Chillan Nuevo. The lodge has a restaurant and bar, a ski and snowboard shop, and an outdoor natural hot tub.

After a dinner of fresh smoked salmon and potatoes, accompanied by some *vino notre*, it was time to head to the infamous Snowpub on the main drag. The Snowpub fills up with a variety of locals and tourists from the nearby cities of Chillan and Concepcion, and we had a great time meeting local ski bums and foreign jet setters. The next morning, we drove back to Santiago airport, gratified that we had traded Canada's summer heat for some truly exceptional snow.

Special to The Globe and Mail

Skiing South America

Some Chilean resorts opened as early as May this year, having received more than 150 centimetres of snow.



RICHARD JOHNSON / THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Pack your bags

GETTING THERE

Air Canada offers flights from Vancouver and Toronto to Santiago (via the U.S.) three days a week.

WHEN TO GO

Resorts are open from late May/early June until at least mid-September.

TOURS

Southamericaski.com Vacations: Whistler, B.C.; www.southamericaski.com; 604-932-7059. Offers packaged trips to South American resorts including Termas de Chillan.
Santiago Adventures: santiagoadventures.com; 56 (2) 415 0667.

WHERE TO STAY

Casa San Regis: Los Andes (near Ski Arpa); santiagoadventures.com. Rates start at about \$70 a night.
Termas de Chillan Resort: Various top-end hotels are listed on the www.termaschillan.cl website.
Mission Impossible Lodge: Las Trancas; www.misnowchile.com. Rates start at about \$80 a person.
Las Trancas International Hostel/Lodge: 56 (42) 244 628. Starts at around \$25 a person.

RESORTS

Ski Arpa: skiarpa.com; 56 (9) 579 0877. Snow cat trips cost \$20 each.
Termas de Chillan: termaschillan.cl. Daily lift tickets cost around \$45.