

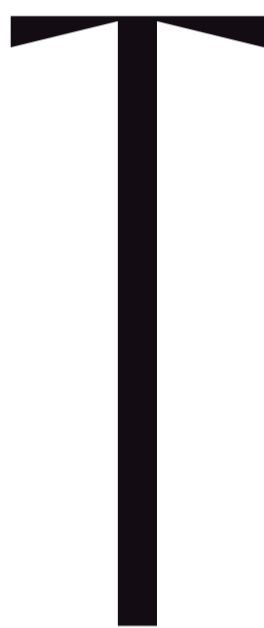
TRAVEL +
LEISURE

WORLD'S
BEST
AWARDS
2021



Into the Forest Primal

Chile's Lake District is a kingdom of ancient trees, snowcapped mountains, and clear glacial waters. For Mark Johanson, it's also a dear old friend.



HERE'S A SPOT about four miles into the Los Lagos Trail, in Chile's Huerquehue National Park, where venerable araucaria trees preside over a primordial rain forest. They pop like umbrellas from

lumpy hills; they curve like palms over placid lagoons. Araucarias are so ecstatic, so top-heavy in their design, that they seemed to punctuate the path ahead of us like giddy exclamation marks.

My partner, Felipe, and I had been hiking all morning just to see them. The higher we climbed, the colder the forest became. Of course, the trees don't mind; they're dressed for the weather in fur coats of pea-green lichen. Araucarias grow only in Chile and Argentina, and only at altitudes above 3,000 feet. Perhaps that's why this area, about 500 miles south of Santiago, has become a place of pilgrimage for Felipe and me over the years. It was our first trek down this particular trail, but our fifth time among the magical araucarias.

The Lake District was my introduction to Chile a decade ago, when I first visited Felipe's homeland. I was already sold on him, but I suppose this is what sold me on his country. A few years later,



I dropped everything to move from Brooklyn to Santiago so I could have places like this at my fingertips. Neither as Mediterranean as central Chile to the north, nor as raw as Patagonia to the south, the Lake District calls to mind the Pacific Northwest—that is, if you squeezed the volcanoes closer together, sprinkled in two dozen lakes, and replaced the Douglas firs with araucarias.

In 2020, this region was supposed to attain the star power of other marquee destinations, like the Atacama Desert and Easter Island. A

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A walkway at Termas Geométricas, a hot-springs complex in Chile's Villarrica National Park.



total solar eclipse finally put it on the map—but the event was, of course, mostly eclipsed by the pandemic. It's a shame. The region's tourism offerings have matured so much in the 10 years since our first visit. And I suppose Felipe and I have, too.

Back then, fresh off backpacking Southeast Asia as a new couple, we hitchhiked our way to Huerquehue, got trapped in a snowbank, and hiked three more miles to reach a rustic cabin—all of which we loved at the time, repeating the misadventures daily as we fumbled our way across the region. In retracing that experience a decade later, we made a few significant upgrades—driving our own car back to comfy lodges for three-course meals. Because, well, we're not in our twenties anymore.

Our first base was *andBeyond Vira Vira* (*andbeyond.com*; doubles from \$1,550), the safari outfitter's only property outside Africa, near the fashionable resort town of Pucón. Vira Vira preaches the gospel of understated luxury, soothing guests with earth tones and natural textiles in its 12 split-level villas, which line the olive-green Liucura River that borders the 34-acre estate. Just upstream is the resort's organic farm, where chef Damián Fernández sources ingredients for his seasonal menus. For adventure, *andBeyond* swaps game drives for trout fishing, whitewater rafting, and hikes up the cartoonishly conical Villarrica volcano, which puffs in the distance, daring travelers to draw near.

We accepted the challenge the next morning. Our ascent to the Pichillancahue Glacier, on the volcano's eastern edge, began in another forest of araucarias—this one in Villarrica National Park.

"Araucarias are actually living fossils from the Triassic period 240 million years ago," said our guide, Nicolas Kapstein, a squirrely fellow with thin-rimmed glasses and textbook recall. "They can only live up to two thousand years, but their look hasn't changed since the age of the dinosaurs."

Because of that, Kapstein told us, the place has "an ancestral energy." Felipe agreed. At one point, overwhelmed by the grandeur of it all, he briefly teared up. Wiping his eyes, he hurried above the snow line into the blue ice of Pichillancahue. Holding each other in the glaring sun, we watched in awe as Villarrica expelled a dense cloud of sulfur into the cobalt sky. Kapstein told us the Mapuche (Chile's largest Indigenous group, who consider the Lake District their ancestral homeland) have two names for it: *Quitralpillán*, which means "spirit of fire," and *Rukapillán*, which means "house of spirits."

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Clockwise from top left: A view of Lago Tinquilco and Villarrica Volcano in Huerquehue National Park; crab-stuffed tortellini—a play on a classic Chilean crab casserole—at El Mesón del Caulle, the restaurant at Futangue Hotel & Spa; the author's partner, Felipe, hiking in Futangue Park.



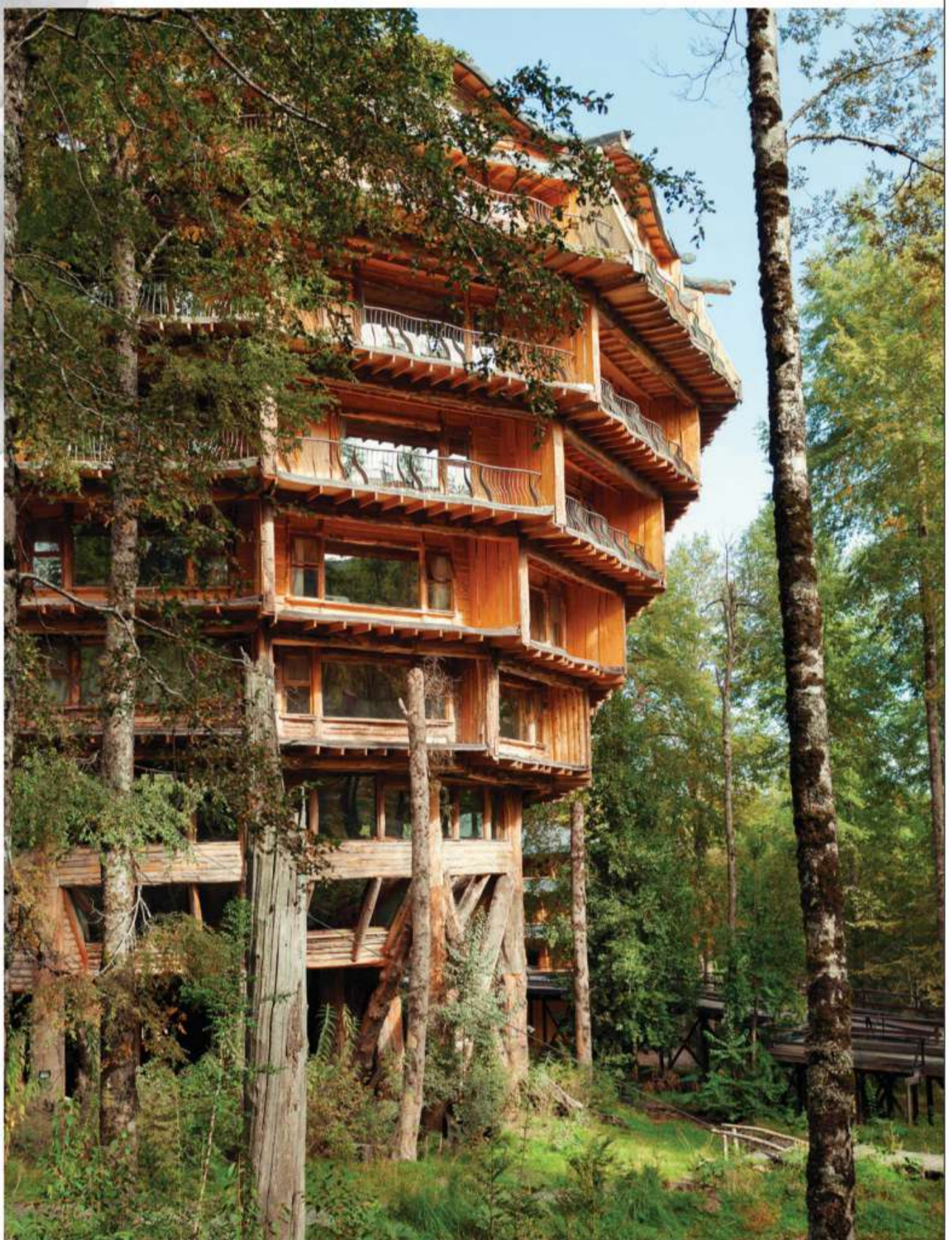


▲ From left: The region's distinctive araucaria trees; *Nothofagus*, one of many architecture-focused hotels in the Huilo Huilo Biological Reserve.

"Oh, and did I mention it's one of the most active volcanoes in South America?" he added, brandishing an impish smile.

High on sulfur and adrenaline, Felipe and I dipped over to the south side of the volcano to decompress at *Termas Geométricas* (termasgeometricas.cl), the most extravagant of the area's dozen hot springs, with scarlet boardwalks and 20 steaming pools in a fern-filled river canyon. We could barely peel ourselves away to get back to Vira Vira for dinner, but when we finally sat down, seared conger eel arrived on ceramic plates embedded with shimmering volcanic sands—bringing our day full circle.

Felipe is the subdirector of an art museum in Santiago, so regional arts and crafts were



also on the agenda. The following morning, we tracked down the studio of textile artist Sandra Rojas ([instagram.com/telares_sandrarojos](https://www.instagram.com/telares_sandrarojos)), whose vibrant *telares* (traditional Andean tapestries) punctuate the wooden walls of Vira Vira. On our way out of town, we stopped at the workshop of Hector Bascuñán Briones ([instagram.com/_artebascu](https://www.instagram.com/_artebascu)), whose signature bowls, hand-carved from the wood of the red-hued rauli tree, had landed on our table at breakfast filled with home-baked bread. The small village of Panguipulli, set amid rolling pastures about an hour's drive south, contained an even greater discovery: *Escuela de Oficios* (oficiospanguipulli.com). This artists' collective uses archaeological finds to inspire modern museum-grade pottery, much of which is anthropomorphic and depicts figures from Mapuche mythology.

Shopping complete, we turned our attention back to the adventure at hand, veering along the northern shore of Lago Panguipulli. Bordered by tall, forested hills,



the 18-mile-long lake has a sinewy, end-of-the-world feel. On its eastern edge is the 297,000-acre Huilo Huilo Biological Reserve: a private park with 156 miles of wooded trails as well as a whimsical campus of fairy-tale lodges, including Montaña Mágica (with a vegetation-covered exterior) and Nothofagus (which resembles an inverted pine cone). We opted for the secluded Nawelpi Lodge (huilohuilo.com; doubles from \$252), which has a handsome private clubhouse and plush, grass-roofed cabins with wood-fired hot tubs that overlook the turquoise La Leona waterfall.

A clear pattern began to emerge: each day, we woke early for a strenuous hike and followed it up with a late-afternoon soak to soothe our muscles, be it in a thermal spring, a hot tub, or the hotel spa. All the while, we laughed at what the scruffy 26-year-old versions of ourselves would think if they saw us now. At least they'd be pleased to know where we were headed next: Lago Ranco, the lake we tried to see, but never reached, a decade ago.

South of Huilo Huilo, we drove through rippled cow country to the German-influenced resort town of Futrono, a posh hamlet on Ranco's northern shores with imposing fundos (agricultural estates) and a downtown drag lined with craft stalls and bakeries selling kuchen. We hugged the lake on a newly paved road, passing the experimental vineyards of Casa Silva (casasilva.cl), whose Pinot Noir and Sauvignon Blanc grapes thrive some 300 miles south of Chile's southernmost established wine region, the Itata Valley. There's no tasting room—it's too remote to get many customers—but we did try a glass of the winery's velvety

▲ *Hiking Villarrica, one of the most active volcanoes in Chile.*

▼ *The library at andBeyond Vira Vira, decorated with works by Chilean artists and designers.*

Pinot when we arrived at our final stop, Futangue Hotel & Spa (parquefutangue.com; doubles from \$210).

The estancia-themed property is a luxurious base camp for visits into the surrounding Futangue Park, an epic 33,000-acre adventureland of crashing waterfalls and emerald lagoons. A stark lava field, created during a 1922 eruption, cuts through the park like a jagged scar. General manager Pascal Rosales—whose grandfather helped Nobel Prize-winning poet Pablo Neruda escape arrest through a nearby mountain pass to Argentina—says the park admits only about 8,000 visitors annually. We hiked together to the top of Cerro Mayo, a bald summit just above the tree line, where we watched as the morning clouds parted to reveal misty mounds of dense rain forest below.

Felipe and I could trace our entire journey between each snowcapped volcano on the horizon. If we squinted a bit, we could see the araucarias poking out from the hills where we began. Fanning their ancient branches into the sky, they seemed like distant fireworks frozen in time. 🌐



FROM TOP: ANDREW MEREDITH GALLERY STOCK; COURTESY OF ANDBEYOND