

HERE'S A THOUGHT:
 "To fear love is to fear life,
 and those who fear life
 are already three parts dead."
 — Bertrand Russell, British philosopher (1872-1970)

desert vacation?

... it's a no-rainer

The extreme climate of South America's **Atacama Desert**, among the driest places on the planet, gives visitors access to uncommon beauty

BY BETH PARKS
 SPECIAL TO THE NEWS

It is drier than a bone on the floor of Death Valley, drier than toast on a parched tongue, and drier than an old preacher's sermon in the middle of winter.

It is South America's Atacama Desert, and it's the driest place on Earth. Stretching over 600 miles up Chile's northern coast to the southern tip of Peru, it is so dry that rainfall is measured in millimeters per decade. Some parts of the desert haven't seen a single drop of rain in the hundreds of years since record-keeping began.

The Atacama Desert owes its dryness, some 100 times greater than that of California's Death Valley, to its location between two mountain ranges. The Pacific

coastal mountains block moisture coming from the west, while the Andes Mountains block it from the east. The Andes are so high that moisture-laden air from the easterly trade winds cools and condenses before it can cross the peaks, dumping vast quantities of rain back into the Amazon region. As a result, the driest place in the world lies just a few scant miles from one of the wettest.

The Atacama was yet another destination on my quest for geographical extremes. I discovered it while planning my trip to Antarctica, the southernmost of the seven continents and the coldest place on the planet.

While researching Chile, my jumping-off place for Antarctica, an Internet photo of

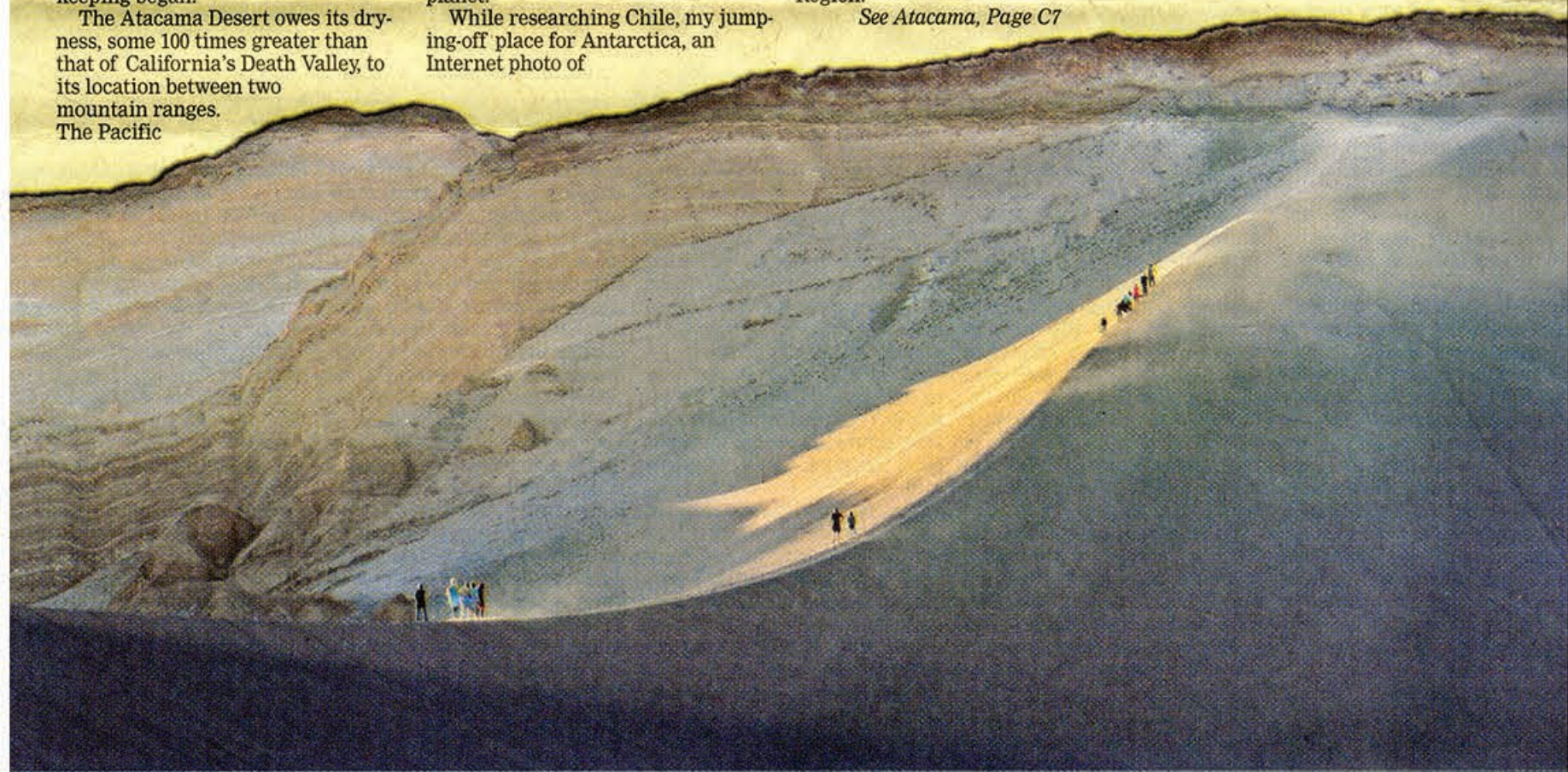
the Atacama's Valle de la Luna caught my eye. Bizarre rock formations in this Valley of the Moon glowed pinkish orange as a full moon rose behind a wind-sculptured peak. I had never seen anything like it, and I knew I had to see it for myself.

Getting to the Atacama was relatively easy. I designed a personalized tour through an online agency. The agency contracted with Brendan, a travel company, which made all the arrangements. A friend and I flew to Santiago and then on to Calama, where a guide met us. He drove us the 60-plus miles to San Pedro de Atacama, an oasis in the altiplano, or high plateau, in the Antofagasta Region.

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BANGOR DAILY NEWS MAP BY BRIAN ROBITAILLE



PHOTOS BY BETH PARKS

Northern Chile's Valle de la Luna (top) in the Atacama Desert in South America so closely resembles a Martian landscape that it has been used as a location for science fiction films and by NASA scientists to test equipment to be used on the Red Planet. Visitors trek over enormous dunes (bottom) in the Atacama, the driest place on Earth.



PHOTOS BY BETH PARKS

At 14,000 feet, El Tatio is often billed as the highest geyser field in the world. Situated in the Andes Mountains near the border between Peru and Bolivia, it is the largest such field in South America and the third-largest on the planet.

Atacama

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This old frontier-style town of adobe houses and narrow, dusty streets drowns at an altitude of about 8,000 feet. Although only about 2,500 people live there, San Pedro de Atacama (San Pedro, for short) attracts visitors from all over the world.

We based ourselves in San Pedro and relied on our guide to introduce us to the wonders of the Atacama and the surrounding area. If you are not with an organized tour, having a guide is a good idea. It's easy to get lost or stranded in the desert, and even simple mistakes can prove fatal.

The Atacama is as spectacular as the Internet photo suggested. What lay at the bottom of the sea a few million years ago now consists of sand, dunes, salt flats and otherworldly shapes that bring to mind a Martian landscape. The Atacama so closely resembles Mars, in fact, that science fiction films have been shot there. NASA also uses the area to test scientific equipment for its Mars missions.

My favorite time in the Atacama was climbing to the top of a huge dune in the Valle de la Luna just before sunset. People from many countries jostled for footholds or found nooks in nearby sandstone outcrops to watch the dramatic change of colors. Rocks and sand changed from pink to violet and then deepened to purple as the sun dropped behind a ridge. Strangers who shared no common language greeted each other as old friends and joined together in celebration before going their separate ways.

If you choose to visit the Atacama, there's plenty more to see in the area than just the desert. For example, the El Tatio geyser field lies about 56 miles northeast of San Pedro. At around 14,000 feet above sea level, it is billed as the highest geyser field in the world (it isn't, but it's close). The best time to arrive is just before sunrise, when steam

rising from the geysers and bubbling fumaroles contrasts best with the cold mountain air. Most of the geysers are small, with the tallest shooting up to about 18 feet. Trails allow you to stroll among them. Don't step off the paths, though. The field's thin crust can easily break, and you can be scalded or even boiled alive.

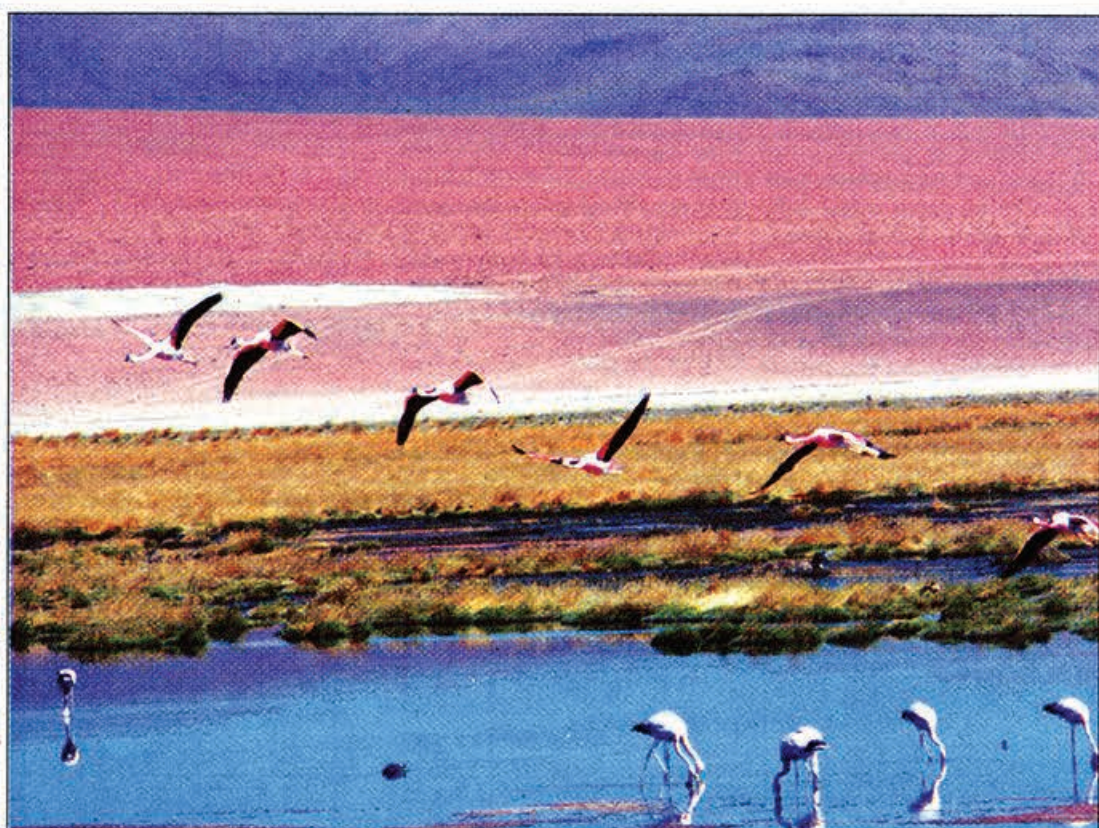
The simple act of walking at such heights can render you breathless and set your heart pounding. You'll want to bring plenty of drinking water and perhaps some aspirin in case you get a headache. The locals also recommend that you sip coca tea to help ward off altitude sickness.

You might want to relax at El Tatio by taking a swim in a thermal pool. Bring your bathing suit and a towel if you plan to take a dip, along with warm clothes to guard against the chill when you get out of the steaming water. Be sure to apply sunblock, though, because the sun's rays can easily burn you in the thin, cloudless atmosphere.

El Tatio can't compare with the drama and expanse of Yellowstone, but it's a nice trip if you don't mind getting up a couple of hours early and bouncing up the gravel roads past a series of volcanoes and abandoned salt-peter mines. If you're lucky, as we were, maybe your guide will boil eggs in a fumarole and serve you breakfast beneath the dazzling blue sky as the sun comes up.

If you like flamingos, the Chaxa Lagoon in Reserva Nacional Los Flamencos is another attraction near San Pedro and well worth a visit. Several species of these large birds frequent the lagoon and the salt plains, called salars. The alkaline, brackish lagoon water supports the growth of such food sources as diatoms, brine-tolerant invertebrates and the red algae that give flamingos their characteristic pink color.

You also might want to climb through the ruins of Pukara de Quitor, a 12th century walled fortress that rests on a steep



Several flamingo species frequent the lagoons and salt plains, called salars, near the oasis town of San Pedro de Atacama.

hillside less than two miles northeast of San Pedro. The remaining walls are mostly rows of stones held together with dried mud. Although the natives probably designed the fortress to defend against marauding local tribes, it easily fell to the invading Spaniards in 1540. Now a national monument, it gives you a glimpse of what life was like for military families all those centuries ago.

Explore the San Pedro area some more and you'll discover churches built by the Spanish conquistadors. You also can visit archaeological sites dating back to the times before Christ.

Be sure to visit the Museo de Arqueologico R.P. Gustavo Le Paige in San Pedro if you'd like to know more about the area's history. Padre LePaige was a Belgian archaeologist who amassed artifacts from more than 10,000 years of atacamenean culture. The displays include items that range from mummies and misshapen skulls to utensils and weapons, representative of the museum's vast collection of 450,000 objects.

The articles owe their excellent preservation to the extreme dryness of the region's sand.

If it's shopping that turns you on, you'll have fun poking around San Pedro's bevy of quaint shops. Traditional handicrafts include items made from leather, seeds and the wool of llamas and alpacas. I discovered that many souvenirs and textiles actually come across the border from neighboring Bolivia, so you may wish to verify their place of origin with the shopkeepers. Other articles of interest in the nearby village of Tocaño, which specializes in crocheted baskets, lamps, decorations and souvenirs from cactus wood and white volcanic stone.

Dining in San Pedro is surprisingly good, although the choice of restaurants is limited. Prices tend to be reasonable. Lodging, of course, varies in quality and cost. You might want to book a place online in advance or have your travel agent do it for you.

Here's a word of caution if you are traveling on your own. Lots of vendors in San Pedro will try to sell you tours and adventures. Be sure to check their reliability and costs before heading out into the desert. You might be wise to choose a reputable guide or travel company to take you where you want to go.

If you enjoy exploring off the beaten track, as I do, then a visit to the Atacama area in northern Chile is well worth the trip. There is far more to do than I have mentioned here, so check out your options on the Internet or with a travel agent. You can get by without knowing Spanish, but it helps if you have a few key phrases at your fingertips.

Have a wonderful time, and don't forget your drinking water.

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