



TRIPS OF A LIFETIME | CHILE



See the universe up close and 200,000 light years away. Photo: iStock

Stars in her eyes



The Atacama Desert is the ultimate destination for stargazing and adventure, writes Catherine Marshall.

This singular trip takes me back to the very beginning, to the metaphysical realm where heaven and earth meet. Draped above me is the Milky Way, so close I can caress it. Sprawled around me is northern Chile's Atacama Desert, so alien I might as well be standing on another planet.

"This one is 200,000 light years away," says guide Pablo Biggi, plunging his laser pointer into a Magellanic cloud.

"What this means is that we're seeing what that dwarf galaxy looked like 200,000 years ago."

Lying back in Nayara Alto Atacama lodge's outdoor observatory, I peer into a vaulted ceiling stippled with stars made from the same iron, carbon and calcium that constitutes my bones.

I'm privileged to have had not one trip of a lifetime, but a handful of uncommonly extraordinary adventures. Still, this is the first time I've seen the universe up close.

For a journey to live forever in the marrow of my celestial bones, it must embolden me, challenge my perceptions, change my way of thinking. The mission is fulfilled here in the world's driest non-polar desert, compressed between Chile's coastal pampas and the Andean Plateau.

Volcanoes menace the skyline, and the hot breath of geysers clouds the geothermal fields. Life defies the desolation: mesquite forests sprout from sterile bedrock, flamingos tiptoe across salt lagoons, humans inhabit dwellings indistinguishable from the desert's adobe massifs.

But it's the night skies – so dry and unpolluted their starlight remains pure – that reframe my perspective. Like the world's most powerful radio telescope, the Atacama Large Millimeter/submillimeter Array (ALMA), whose antennas spill across the Chajnantor Plateau, I'm plumbing a destination almost beyond reach.

"Let's imagine that within this galaxy there is a planet with a highly

evolved civilisation," Biggi says. "Now let's imagine that they have a powerful telescope. Seen from 200,000 light years away, there would be no cities, no roads, not even swords or armour. What they would see are the very first bands of Homo sapiens."

Laying flat again, I lose myself in the cosmos and imagine a powerful telescope trained on me 200 millennia hence. From that civilisation's vantage point I'd be smaller than a pinprick, less substantial than a grain of Atacama Desert sand.

I The Classic Safari Company's four-night Atacama experience costs from \$3250 and includes transfers from Calama Airport, full board at Nayara Alto Atacama lodge, stargazing and daily guided excursions. See classicsafaricompany.com. The writer was a guest of Nayara Alto Atacama lodge.

FIVE FESTIVALS OF A LIFETIME

Oktoberfest, Munich, Germany

One of the world's biggest public festivals runs from mid-September into October. It opens with a parade of 7000 locals in folk costumes and continues under beer tents that can each hold 6000 drinkers. Brass bands play and crowds celebrate. See oktoberfest.de

Holi Festival, Jaipur, India

Hindu New Year (a lunar event, usually in March) celebrates spring, love and the triumph of good in the form of Lord Vishnu. Jaipur erupts in bonfires, drum-playing and spectacular street celebrations featuring coloured-powder throwing and water fights. Join the dancing in the streets. Hilarious fun. See incredibleindia.gov.in

Day of the Dead, Oaxaca, Mexico

This commemoration of departed relatives (November 1) has a surprisingly party-like atmosphere. Street parades and partygoers enliven the city. Picnics are held in cemeteries, mariachi bands play and marigold petals are thrown like confetti. See oaxaca.travel

Ice and Snow Sculpture Festival, Harbin, China

From late December to early February, frigid Harbin hosts the world's biggest ice festival. Famous monuments and enormous buildings are constructed from ice and hundreds of ice sculptures and lanterns illuminated. If you're game, plunge with locals into ice holes in the Songhua River. See cnto.org.au

Carnival, Venice, Italy

As late January and early February mist arrives, Carnival explodes with music and colour. This 800-year-old festival opens with a masked procession and continues with costume balls, gala dinners, juggling acts and carnival-goers dressed in harlequin costumes. The finale is a boat procession on the Grand Canal. See carnevale.venezia.it

Brian Johnston