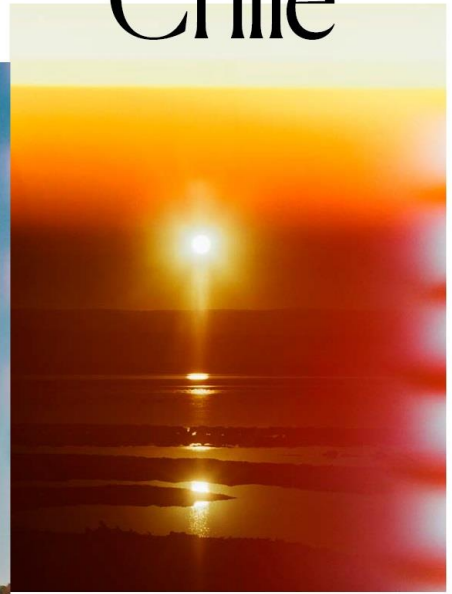


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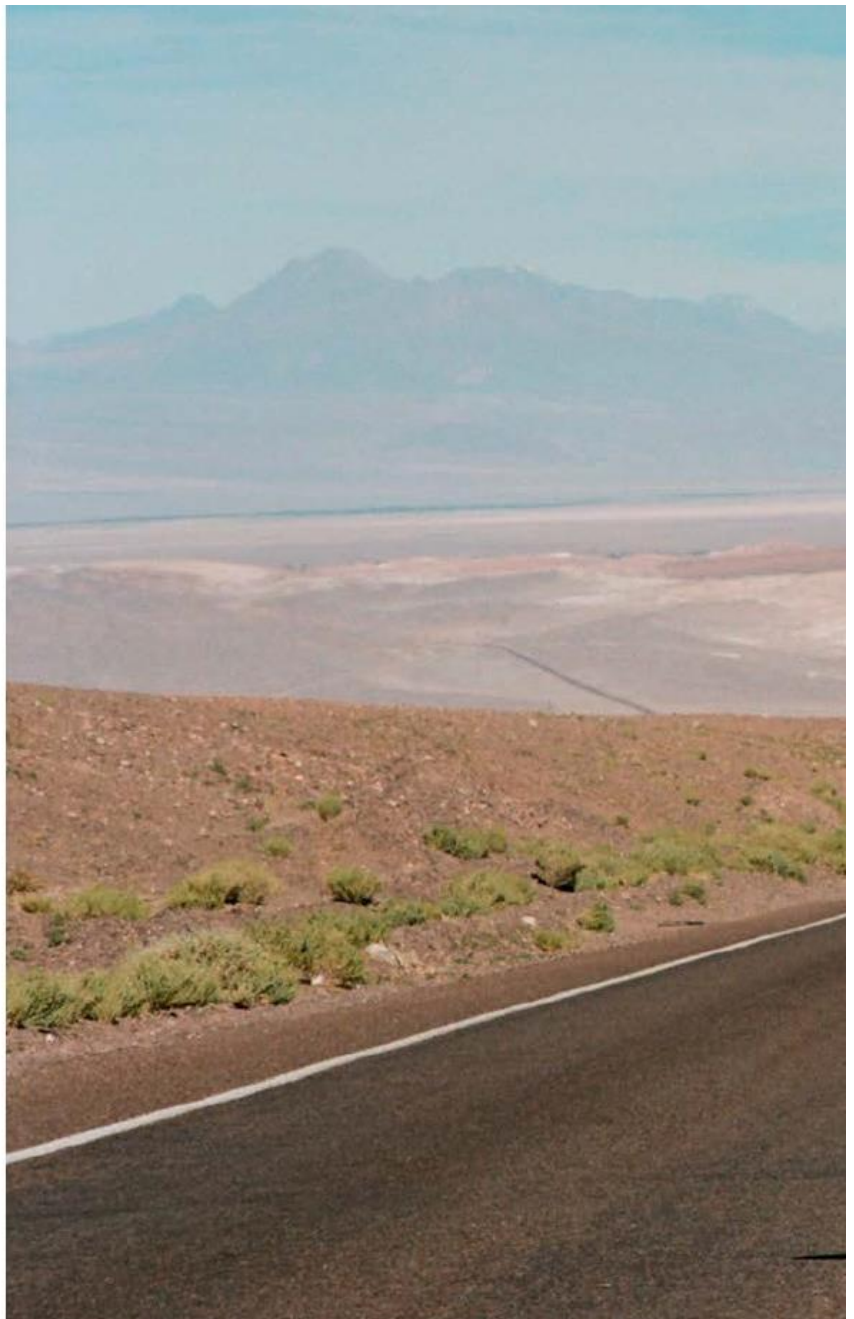


DESIGNER MARIA CORNEJO RETURNS TO HER HOMETOWN AND FINDS IT EVEN MORE BEAUTIFUL THAN SHE REMEMBERED

By Darrell Hartman photographs by Mark Borthwick

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Maria Cornejo, the women's fashion designer best known for her deceptively simple, sculptural silhouettes, left her native Chile at age 12, when Augusto Pinochet's coup d'état forced her family to flee to England. "My parents were socialists," she says over lemonade in her Brooklyn brownstone. "My dad left in November of '73; we left in January '74." And though she's returned often over the years—for family funerals, for work—those trips were more obligation than vacation. "I wanted to go back for something joyous," she says. "My country has changed a lot since I was a child, but even as a grown-up I'd never really been a tourist there." And so, last year, she finally made that real vacation happen, with the help of Upscape, a tour company specializing in Chile. Their in-country experts devised a broad sampling of her homeland, a place "so narrow you can see the beach and the Andes at once," Cornejo says, laughing. Over the course of eight days, she and her husband, the photographer Mark Borthwick, saw firsthand just how much things have changed since the early '70s: Winemakers have expanded their repertoire from bargain-bin bottlings to finer vintages; chefs are now staying in Chile to practice farm-to-table cooking, rather than moving abroad; boutique luxury lodges have popped up in many of the country's most remote corners. And yet much remains the same—the expansive landscapes, the warmth of the people—the same things Cornejo remembers from tooling around the countryside surrounding Santiago as a kid, packed into a VW Kleinbus with her family.



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Previous spread, from left: "The great thing about going to Chile from my home in New York is that there's no huge time difference," says the designer Maria Cornejo. "We flew at night, woke up the next morning in Santiago, and got our feet on the ground at Kingston Family Vineyards in the Casablanca wine region." She traveled with her husband, the photographer Mark Borthwick. "We had a view of the Villarrica Volcano from our room—and pretty much wherever else we happened to be," he says. "At night you see the top glowing from the lava." In the north, "the Salar de Atacama is the biggest salt flat in the country—and it looks like something on a different planet," Cornejo says. This spread: "This was on the road from Calama to San Pedro de Atacama, the high desert, which is at about 7,900 feet," she says. "We loved the incredible colors—that red sand!—and the open expanse of sky."





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"Everything at Hacienda Hotel Vira Vira [now the and Beyond Vira Vira] was very lush and manicured—quite slick, as opposed to rustic," Borthwick says. "The owners had taken so much care over it, from the eight-course meals [of slow-cooked wild boar, fresh garden vegetables, cheese, and butter from the hotel's own dairy] to the wood-heated outdoor hot tubs. We loved to see the sun coming up over the river."

HOW THEY DID IT

In Santiago

Hotel Magnolia is a revamped and expanded 1929 town house with 42 rooms that blends historic elements (an original spiral staircase and glass catwalks) and 21st-century touches (subtle graphic art and chessboard marble floors). It's also close to the restaurants and nightlife of Santiago's hip Lastarria neighborhood. Cornejo's two top picks there: Les Assassins, a Parisian-style local institution for more than 50 years where the abalone with salsa verde is her favorite dish, and casual Mulato, where the seafood menu is always changing based on what's fresh. "I'd recommend a good hour and a half at the Museo Violeta Parra," Cornejo says of the three-year-old museum dedicated to the Chilean folk singer and artist. "The scale and texture of her artwork, especially her embroidery, was a discovery for me." Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, which showcases Chilean fine art in a glorious Beaux Arts building, is another favorite. For handcrafted Chilean textiles and ceramics, Cornejo recommends Los Dominicos market, located at the eastern terminus of the red metro line; the Lastarria fashion boutique Hall Central has a nice selection from independent designers, she says.

In Pucón

This southern city is a 90-minute flight from Santiago. From Pucón Airport, it's an easy 15-minute

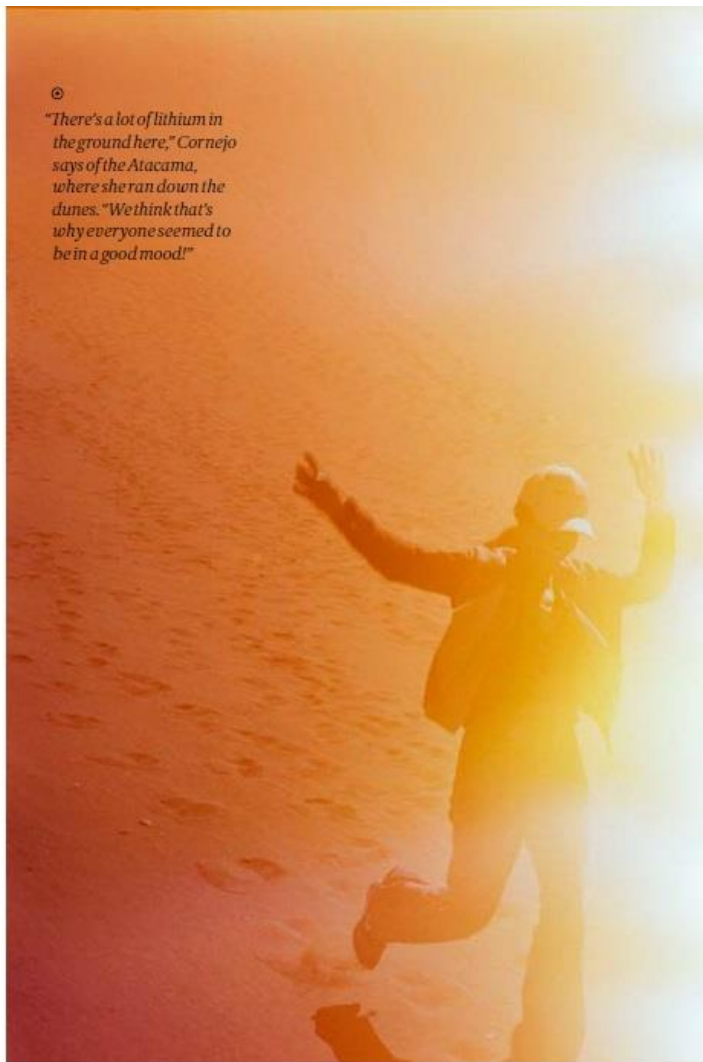
drive to the estatelike andBeyond Vira Vira, one of the most indulgent places to stay in southern Chile, full stop. The 18 rooms and suites have clean lines and large picture windows, with cabin-inspired interiors clad in sustainably harvested local timber; each has a hot tub within an easy dash of the swimmable Liucura River. "The dinners were multicourse and very well presented: local salmon, vegetables from their garden, bread so good it made Maria forget about her gluten intolerance," Borthwick says. (The property, which was previously named Hacienda Hotel Vira Vira, will reopen for the season on September 1.) Cornejo recommends culling through the many crafts stores in town for locally made wool throws and ponchos as well as silver jewelry. The area is also rich in natural hot springs, many of which you can visit for a dip; the staff at Vira Vira can organize it.

In the Atacama Desert

Calama's El Loa Airport is the gateway to the region, with frequent two-hour flights from Santiago. From there, it's about an hour's drive to the Alto Atacama Desert Lodge & Spa, which has 42 rooms in its low-profile footprint in the shadow of a terracotta-colored ridge, just outside the town of San Pedro de Atacama. (They've got everything you need on-site, but should you want to visit town, they'll drive you.) Stone, wood, and local textiles predominate in the design. "It was low-key, unpretentious, and beautifully landscaped, but in a very wild way," Cornejo says.

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"There's a lot of lithium in the ground here," Cornejo says of the Atacama, where she ran down the dunes. "We think that's why everyone seemed to be in a good mood!"



"I loved the gorgeous open-air bathrooms that let you look up at the stars." You can spot the namesake birds of Los Flamencos National Reserve amid the park's 182,000 raw acres. You'll have to set out before dawn to see the 80 geysers of El Tatio at their best; the early wake-up call is worth it.

Getting there and around

American, Delta, IATAM, and United offer nonstop flights from the U.S. to Santiago. Internal flights are short and easy, and roads are generally in good repair. "You could do it all" in a rental car, Cornejo says, but relying on local drivers makes things considerably easier. On her trip, Upscape handled all the hotel bookings, flights, transfers, and reservations, making the entire itinerary turnkey. D.H.

