

TRAVEL

CLASSIFIEDS

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Intimate lodging and dining is the trademark of Nawelpi Lodge (Puma Lodge), at Huilo Huilo, Chile. PHOTOS BY STEVE HAGGERTY, TNS

CHILE

Whimsy in the wild

Eco-tourism is booming at a UNESCO-designated biosphere with way-out architecture

ANNE Z. COOKE
Tribune News Service

NELTUME, Chile

My first clue that Huilo Huilo, in central Chile, might not be your typical wilderness park was when I unfolded the tourist map and spotted the word “canopy.”

An English word. Not one you’d expect to find in a Spanish dictionary. Nor a name you’d be likely to see on a map of a rare temperate rainforest, a 101,000-hectare preserve in the foothills of the Andes Mountains.

I looked again and found a second “canopy,” and a third, as if the map-maker tasked with illustrating Huilo Huilo’s “green mansions” decided that if one canopy was good, three must be a charm. So I poured another cup of tea and took a closer look.

Huilo Huilo, a UNESCO-designated biosphere, is a park like Yellowstone or Glacier national parks, a protected biological reserve. But it’s also a tourist resort, a for-profit business. Here, on the border between Patagonia and the Lakes District, where the Mapuche tribe once shared the trees with the forest fairies — living spirits of ferns and flowers, frogs and fungi — eco-tourism is booming.

If any doubt remains, Huilo Huilo’s tourist map, a “Where’s Waldo” visitor guide, proves the point. Done up in comic book colors and crowded with cartoon figures, it’s chock-a-block with visitor services, nature trails, ski slopes, trout streams and hotels built to blend into the undergrowth.

Here is the Reino Fungi Lodge, the “Mushroom Queen,” a fat round shape resting on a



Find yourself in nature at the rustic Magic Mountain Lodge, the first hotel built at Huilo Huilo, Chile. Was it inspired by author Thomas Mann’s famous novel *The Magic Mountain*? Only hotel owner Victor Petermann knows for sure.

cement stalk. There is the multi-sided Nothofagus Hotel & Spa, also known as the Baobob Hotel, with a tree growing in the dining room, guest room doors opening

onto a spiralling corridor and an activities desk offering an infinite array of outdoor adventures.

> See DIZZYINGLY, page D2



THE NITTY-GRITTY

The resort is at Neltume, a village near Lake Pirehuico. Fly to Santiago, Chile, and on to Temuco airport, a two-hour drive from Huilo Huilo.

Rent a car or hire local transport. Summer months, December through February, are warm and dry. Spring and fall are beautiful; winter recreation includes skiing.

For description, history and mission, go to huilohuilo.com/en/.

For reservations and rates go to huilohuilo.com/our-accommodation/hotel-nothofagus.

Rooms for two in the Nothofagus hotel start at \$222 per night, but vary depending on seasons and packages. Always ask for special rates. Kids sharing with parents are free or discounted.



TRAVEL NOTES

U.S. officials find record number of guns

Los Angeles Times

Travellers flying out of U.S. airports have set a new but unsettling record.

In the week that ended April 22, airport screeners took 73 firearms from passengers, breaking the record of 68 firearms discovered on travellers last fall during the final week of October, according to the Transportation Security Administration.

All but five of the guns were loaded, the TSA said. (Travellers can transport guns in checked luggage but not in carry-on bags.)

The 73 weapons included a .22-caliber pistol found at Boston’s Logan International Airport and a .357 magnum revolver at San Antonio International Airport.

EU: return of border checks would be costly

The Associated Press

BRUSSELS — The European Commission estimates that a permanent reintroduction of border checks in Europe’s passport-free travel area could cost up to 18 billion euros (\$20.7 billion US) a year.

Some EU countries, including Germany, have temporarily tightened border controls as hundreds of thousands of people fleeing conflict and poverty have sought asylum.

The Commission said this week that the direct cost of any permanent move could amount to between five billion and 18 billion euros a year.

It would include more expensive road transportation, the impact of delaying and controlling more than one billion cross-border trips each year, as well as administrative and customs costs.

The estimate doesn’t consider the impact on tourism, lower trade volumes, changes in production chains and the possible undermining of the EU’s common visa system.



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The Hotel Nothofagus — so-named for a genus of southern beech trees — is the largest of Huilo Huilo's four hotels, at the Huilo Huilo Biosphere Reserve in Chile. PHOTOS BY STEVE HAGGERTY, TRIBUNE NEWS SERVICE

> FROM D1

Dizzyingly long zip lines straddle deep dark gorges

The Montana Magica hotel — the Magic Mountain — connected to the other hotels by a covered boardwalk, was the owner's first experiment in rustic design. The result is a moss-covered, cone-shaped, tree-like building made almost entirely of custom-hewn local wood, with inset windows and a brook spilling off the top. Its giant logs, thick beams and untrimmed board panelling are a one-off work of art.

On one corner of the map, a 38-metre waterfall rushes over a fractured rock; in another corner, a pair of horseback riders canters across a meadow. Forest trails, the Rio Fuy and Lake Pirehueico promote hiking, fishing, kayaking, easy and risky whitewater rafting, birding and horseback riding.

At the map's upper edge, an ice climber scales 2,400-metre Mocho Choshuenco's glacier while a skier schusses down this active volcano's snowy slopes. Miniature deer — the endangered Andean "huemul" — and a puma, Darwin frog and a clutch of long-necked guanaco — first cousins to the llama — peek out from between the trees.

On the volcano's lower forests, "Canopy" zip lines mark the spot where — as I was soon to discover — five dizzyingly long cables straddle deep dark gorges.

"El canopy, you know, it means rides in the air," said our guide Juan Valencia, on my second day of vacation, leading me and a

handful of other visitors to the zip line's check-in hut.

Buckling us into our harnesses, he led the way up a trail hacked into the hillside where the cables were bolted into rocks beside precariously perched platforms — or so it seemed as I teetered on the edge.

As Jacob Salgado, the second guide, clipped me onto each cable, he reminded me to lean back, straighten my legs, point my feet and fly like the wind. "Remember, it's very long," he said, prying my hand, locked in a death grip, off the cable. "If you brake like that you won't get to the other side."

The next "canopy" — a sign pointing to the Darwin Trail around the village complex — was tamer. Starting early, we joined ecologist Diego Rojas, from the Simon Bolivar University in Santiago, for a half-day walk around the perimeter.

Diving into the forest, we stopped beneath a stand of giant beech trees to look at the flora and to learn why Huilo Huilo is classified as a rare temperate rain forest.

The beech trees, said Rojas — "coihue" and "rauli," in Mapudungun, the native Mapuche language — "are members of the Nothofagus genus, indigenous to the area since the Jurassic period."

But the forest was isolated when the supercontinent Gondwanaland broke up, creating today's continents. Now an

eco-island, the forest occupies a limited range, between 35 and 40 degrees south and 700- and 1,200-metre elevation.

Farther along, we stopped at the Darwin Frog Museum, a one-room cabin with exhibits founded to support research into the fungi killing this and other frogs worldwide. When Rojas explained that the chirp-chirp heard overhead was a recording of the endangered frog, we realized that not even this museum had a living specimen. "We're hoping to find one," said Rojas, shaking his head.

Challenged to locate one of the critters, we combed through the surrounding understory for a few minutes, searching under ferns and vines, but found only the wispy "guila" bush. Pronounced "huila," said Rojas "this one grows everywhere, even when nothing else will." Could it have been the root of the name Huilo Huilo?

By the time we stopped to watch an Andean condor overhead and admired the pre-European Mapuche artifacts in the nearly finished Volcano Museum — named for its shape, not its contents — the sun was high in the sky. Joining the boardwalk trail across a boggy meadow, we found the third "canopy."

"That's Canopy Village, right there," said Maria, a housekeeper who was pushing a cart of towels. "It's this way," she said, putting down the laundry and opening the door to one of the spartan wood



The waterfall near Neltume, on the Rio Fuy River in the Huilo Huilo Biosphere Reserve.

cabins shaped like old-time pioneer wagons. The cabins, priced for campers and families, perch on stilts next to the Huemul enclosure, another of Huilo Huilo's wildlife preservation projects. "If you look through there," she said, pointing to the windows near the floor, "you can see the deer when they come to drink. We had three deer to start; now we have 20."

I could have put on crampons, roped up and climbed Mocho Choshuenco's icy summit. This guided trek, a match for glacier skiing in Norway, earns an eight on the risk-meter.

Instead, I joined a snowmobile tour accompanied by glaciologist Antonio Vasquez, who also runs Huilo Huilo's ski area. Making angels and snapping selfies among blowing snow clouds was a buzz. But it was a bittersweet buzz because the glacier is melting away.

While we watched, Vasquez fetched his shovel and as he does at intervals, dug down through the snow, hollowing out a hole in the ice. Peering down at the last few year's layers, we saw each was thinner than the one below it.

But Huilo Huilo is booming, confirming the belief that there's

only one way to save a wilderness: buy it and prevent development. In North America, governments traditionally assume this role. But in countries that can't or won't step up, the eco-tourism model can save scarce wilderness, as it has done in Africa, Asia, the Pacific and elsewhere in South America.

How does it work? Individuals or groups buy a piece of land, agree to preserve most of it and dedicate space for a tourist centre with lodging and services. Travellers looking for new, unspoiled destinations visit the area, stay at the hotels and spend money for rooms, food and guide services, creating jobs for local residents. An unbroken circle, it's not "by and by," but now.

And about those "canopies." For me, none rivalled the real canopy, the treetops reaching for the sky, brushing against the balcony of my fourth-floor hotel room, framing my view of Mocho Choshuenco.

The next best thing to a tree-house, this was where I went to catch the sunrise, the birds twitter and the stars. Looking toward the horizon, Huilo Huilo's 101,000 hectares were all mine.

History hidden in desert bloom



Austin Hill, left, and Yorke Rowan are mapping ancient stone structures in Jordan. SAM MCNEIL, AP

SAM MCNEIL
The Associated Press

WADI EL-QATTAFI, Jordan — For a brief time, Jordan's eastern desert blooms. The dozens of mesas commanding the bleak horizons are now skirted with vegetation.

Through binoculars, these charcoal husks of dead volcanoes seem shrouded in green mist.

Birds sing above yellow, red and purple wildflowers peeking up around flint shards and stone carvings. Many carvings are in the ancient Safaitic script, an ancestor of modern Arabic, but others are more recent: a drawing of a long-haul truck and "1999" scrawled in Arabic.

Summer's heat will soon burn the spring colours away and return the "qaa," or plains in Arabic, to the basalt black, sandy brown sand and sky blue, says Yorke Rowan, an archeologist who has spent the past seven years studying the dawn of human civilization in Wadi El-Qattafi, Jordan.

He has learned that this desert was grassland with topsoil where long ago humans stalked herds of gazelle and built homes, corrals and hunting traps. Semi-nomadic peoples built "Neolithic hamlets" used during seasonal hunting, shepherding and perhaps farming in the 6500 B.C. to 6000 B.C. era, Rowan said.

"There's a lot more going on in this desert region that looks like such a blasted, empty territory to our Western eyes, including archeologists who should know better, that we're starting to discover," he said.

Sixty kilometres from the nearest city, Azraq, Rowan and colleagues in the Eastern Badia Archeological Project have mapped thousands of these 8,000-year-old stone structures, aided by a 21st-century technology.

Rowan drives out across the plain to a launch site for a drone, built and operated by archeologist Austin Hill. Rowan throws it into the sky and Hill pilots the drone and its cameras out over the mesas.

From the air, peculiar shapes form on the slopes of the black mesas: some circular, others kilometres-long.

The large number of structures hints at an environment much more like the today's spring bloom. Human remains, stone knives, arrowheads and seeds discovered at the mesas or nearby at Wisad Pools also support the theory.

Current understanding of the Neolithic era is "undergoing its own revolution," Rowan said.

Archeologists across the Middle East are re-examining the basic assumptions of humanity's roots. Did the spread of agriculture cause the era's population spike, or was it the other way around?

For now, there remains so much to do with trowel and drones, that Rowan and colleagues named the valley "the land of conjecture."

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