

EARLY-STAGE RESEARCH · DRAFT

RESEARCH DOCUMENT

Atacama, April 2028

San Pedro de Atacama and Explora · four travelers, one continuing across the altiplano to Uyuni · the shape of the trip, before any booking

Read this first. This document is an early-stage draft, shared to show what the first pass of a trip looks like before quotes, bookings and final decisions exist. Prices are a mix of published rate cards, one live fare pull, and directional ranges, and each is labelled. Nothing here is a quote. It will be replaced with a more complete version as the plan matures.

ABOUT THIS DOCUMENT

This is a trip I am planning for my own group of four, which is useful precisely because it shows the process unfiltered. One traveler wants to do Explora's Travesía crossing from Atacama into Bolivia and finish at the Salar de Uyuni. The other three want the Atacama and then a gentler ending. Everyone has a question about altitude. The job at this stage is not to book anything. It is to settle the shape: when to go, how to sequence the days so the altitude question answers itself, where the group splits, and what the realistic cost is, so that when the booking windows open the decisions are already made.

Why April

Two independent reasons converge on April 2028.

The Uyuni crossing. April is the transition month at the Salar de Uyuni: the one window that can offer both the mirror reflections from residual water and dry driving access to the deep salt flats, sometimes on the same day. January to March is peak mirror but parts of the salar are impassable; from May the water is gone.

The El Tatio question. The geysers sit near 14,000 feet and the excursion leaves before dawn. April mornings there run about 14 to 5°F (–10 to –15°C), against 0 to –13°F in the June to August winter. If the highest day trip is the open decision for the group, April is when it is most likely to be a yes.

More generally, April is the start of the Atacama shoulder season: lower lodge rates, fewer people, daytime temperatures around 71 to 75°F, and stable dry skies once the summer altiplanic rains end. High-altitude mornings are cold but far more manageable than mid-winter.

One sharp detail: book from 6 April onward. Explora's published rate card puts 1 to 5 April in its mid season and 6 to 30 April in its quiet season, the cheapest band. A few days of slippage is worth real money on a four-night stay.

The altitude ladder

This is the organizing idea of the whole itinerary. Nobody books the El Tatio decision in advance. The group climbs to it in order and stops wherever it likes, sleeping low at 7,900 feet the entire time and going up only on day trips.

STEP	ELEVATION	STRAIN
Sleeping in San Pedro de Atacama	7,900 ft	Baseline
Laguna Chaxa and the Salar de Atacama; Laguna Cejar; town	7,500 to 7,900 ft	None
Valle de la Luna, Dunas de Chula, Cordillera de la Sal	8,200 to 8,500 ft	Low
Puritama hot springs	~11,500 ft	Moderate, with a warm reward
Miscanti and Miñiques lagoons	~13,200 ft	High, mid-morning, daylight
El Tatio geysers	13,800 to 14,200 ft	Peak, freezing pre-dawn start

Miscanti and Miñiques is the dress rehearsal. It is nearly El Tatio's altitude, but at mid-morning, in daylight, without the 4am start. Do that first. If it is comfortable, El Tatio is a small step. If it is not, the group skips the top rung having lost nothing but a morning.

This is also why trip length matters more than excursion choice. Four or five Explora nights leave room to climb in order. Three nights forces an El Tatio attempt before anyone has acclimatized or learned anything, which is the version that goes badly.

The shape: an eight-day core, then a fork

Day 0	Overnight flight, West Coast to Santiago
Day 1	Santiago buffer night
Day 2	Santiago to Calama to San Pedro. Town hotel
Day 3	Town. Acclimatize low
Day 4	Move to Explora. The Uyuni traveler's own acclimatization days overlap here
Days 5 to 7	Explora together. Climb the ladder
Day 8	Split. One traveler departs on the Travesía; the other three fly home or add a stop

Getting there

The route is fixed: West Coast to Santiago, Santiago to Calama, road to San Pedro. There is no shortcut. Driving from Santiago is 1,650 km of open desert and belongs on no itinerary.

Long haul	Roughly 13 to 14 hours with one connection. LATAM via Los Angeles or New York, or Copa via Panama. No nonstop.
Santiago to Calama (CJC)	About 2 hours, roughly 10 flights a day across LATAM, SKY and JetSMART. Not the constrained leg.
Calama to San Pedro	100 km, about 1 hour 10 minutes. Shared shuttles \$12 to \$15 per person; for four people a private transfer is worth it. Explora includes airport transfers, so this only applies to the town nights.
Live fare, April 2027 as a proxy	\$1,730 to \$1,800 round trip with a checked bag, every option two stops via Santiago. Budget \$1,800 to \$2,100 per person for 2028.

Two cautions from that fare pull, both worth acting on. The cheap results mix carriers: LATAM outbound, Copa homeward, with the Santiago to Calama leg often on JetSMART or SKY as a separate ticket. That is no protection if anything slips, so the real comparison is a single LATAM record through to Calama. And the Santiago buffer night is not optional. International customs and agricultural screening there routinely run over two hours, the cheap itineraries already carry eight-hour Santiago layovers, and everyone wants a night's sleep before altitude anyway. A buffer night turns a risk into a rest.

Town first, then the lodge

The first 48 hours are deliberately unambitious: acclimatizing at 7,900 feet, walking flat adobe streets, nothing strenuous. Paying an all-inclusive lodge rate for those days is poor value, because you would be buying a thirty-excursion program on exactly the days you should not use it. So the plan is one or two nights in a town hotel, then the move to Explora. It also gives the group the texture of San Pedro before the lodge, which is the part that was missing on a previous trip to El Calafate.

TOWN HOTEL SHORTLIST	APPROX. RATE	CHARACTER
Terrantai Lodge	~\$200	21 rooms in the centre, historic adobe walls designated a National Monument, small pool, evening wine and cheese. The pick.
Our Habitas Atacama	higher	Opened 2023, design-led wellness property, pool and spa, a 20-minute walk outside town.
La Casa de Don Tomás / El Refugio	mid	Long-established; El Refugio is the newer 30-room sister with air conditioning and private patios.
Hotel Takha Takha	~\$82	Simple, good breakfast, pool, no air conditioning.

Rates are approximate and will be re-checked closer to booking. April is shoulder season, so à la carte excursions from town operators can be booked a day or two ahead.

Explora Atacama, four nights

Three nights is Explora's published minimum, so a four-night block fits cleanly. The lodge is a 15-minute walk or five-minute drive from the town centre, which is the key difference from Explora Patagonia: nobody is captive.

Walk into San Pedro for dinner whenever you like. Included in the rate: thirty-plus guided explorations, all meals and drinks, entrance fees, airport transfers, the spa, and a private observatory with one of the larger private telescopes in Chile.

ROOM, QUIET SEASON, PUBLISHED 2025–26 CARD	SINGLE	DOUBLE
Tulur	\$810	\$1,400
Yali	\$900	\$1,560
Catur Suite	\$1,160	\$2,020

Rates are per room per night, not per person. Assume 2028 sits 10 to 15% above these. If a booking engine quotes around \$1,000 per person, check which category it defaulted to; the entry-level Tulur double works out to \$700 per person.

Why Explora rather than Awasi

Awasi is excellent: twelve rooms, each with a dedicated guide and 4WD, which would let anyone turn around mid-excursion if altitude bit. But three people means two villas and probably two guides, pushing it toward double Explora's cost for a benefit the group would share anyway. And the fourth traveler is already inside Explora for the Travesía, so one reservations agent can align her crossing against the group's stay. Split across two companies and nobody owns the seam.

The core itinerary, day by day

DAY 0 Overnight transit

West Coast to Santiago, roughly 13 to 14 hours of travel with one connection.

DAY 1 Santiago buffer night

A restful hotel night near the airport. Resets the clock, absorbs any delay, and means the desert flight the next morning is not at risk.

DAY 2 Santiago to San Pedro de Atacama

Two-hour flight to Calama, then the road transfer to San Pedro. Check in to the town hotel, then a slow evening walking the flat adobe streets at 7,900 feet. Nothing else.

DAY 3 Town acclimatization, bottom of the ladder

Morning: sleep in, then the local markets and the historic square. Afternoon: Laguna Cejar, about 7,500 feet, a high-density salt sinkhole where the salt concentration lets you float effortlessly, Dead Sea style. Late afternoon: Valle de la Luna, about 8,400 feet, a guided tour through the salt caverns and dunes just outside town, finishing with the walk up the Duna Mayor to watch the sunset from the Mirador de Kari, where the Cordillera de la Sal turns crimson.

DAY 4 Move to Explora

Morning check-out and the short move to the lodge. Afternoon: meet the Explora guides and map out the coming days, then a first gentle exploration, either a horseback ride through the Dunas de Chula at about 8,200 feet (Explora breeds and trains its own horses for this terrain) or an easy trek along the ridges of the Cordillera de la Sal at about 8,500 feet.

DAYS 5 TO 7 Explora, climbing the ladder

Puritama hot springs, about 11,500 feet. Ask for the Guatín canyon trek: a ravine walk flanked by centuries-old cardón cacti that ends at Explora's private pool at the top of the reserve, the largest and clearest of the pools and closed to the public.

Miscanti and Miñiques lagoons, about 13,200 feet. An early start to see the deep turquoise volcanic lakes before the midday altiplanic winds break the reflections, with vicuñas and flamingos along the way, often paired with the red-rock flats of Piedras Rojas. This is the dress rehearsal for El Tatio.

El Tatio geysers, about 14,100 feet. The pre-dawn departure to the world's highest geyser field, with Explora serving breakfast in the geothermal field as the steam columns catch the sunrise. Skip the lukewarm public hot spring here and save the swimming for Puritama. Only attempted if Miscanti went well.

Stargazing. Book the observatory session early in the stay, so there is more than one chance at a clear, windless night.

The fork: day 8 onward

Fork 1 The Uyuni Travesía, one traveler

Explora's Travesía runs from Atacama across the altiplano into Bolivia and ends at the Salar de Uyuni: from about **\$8,400 per person for seven nights**, all-inclusive, operated as a private trip. The crossing enters Bolivia at Hito Cajón, 47 km from San Pedro, where the group changes vehicles with an Explora guide and continues past the Sol de la Mañana geysers and a string of salt flats, wetlands and flamingo lagoons, including Laguna Colorada, to a first night at the Ramaditas mountain lodge. Day two crosses old mining valleys to the Chituca mountain lodge, with a stop at Laguna Turquiri. Day three reaches the salar itself, at 3,665 m the world's largest and highest salt flat, with lunch on the flats and a visit to Isla Incahuasi before arriving at the lodge at the foot of Tunupa volcano. The remaining days are explored from there: hikes on the volcano's slopes, bike rides across the salt, and drives to the villages around its base.

Sleeping altitude climbs from 7,900 feet in San Pedro to a maximum of about 13,400 feet, then settles at 12,100 feet at Uyuni. That is a materially bigger altitude ask than the core trip, and her decision needs its own answer. Her Atacama days come first, and Explora keeps day one non-strenuous for acclimatization, so the overlap with the group costs her nothing.

Fork 2 The other three

Option A: straight home

Calama to Santiago to the West Coast. Clean, and there is no shame in it after eight days at altitude.

Option B: Colchagua Valley wine country, two nights

A mid-range, late-arrival, late-departure add-on chosen to feel different from previous trips to Casablanca and Valparaíso. April avoids the summer heat and lands in the autumn harvest season, although Colchagua's own vendimia festival is usually early March, so the group would likely miss the festival itself and get the working harvest instead.

Day 8. Afternoon flight from Calama to Santiago, then a rental car or private driver south on Ruta 5 for about 2.5 hours. Check in to Hotel TerraViña (about \$150 to \$180 per night), a family-run boutique hotel surrounded by the

Laura Hartwig vineyards, with terracotta roofs, oak floors and balconies facing the vines and the Andes. Alternatives: Apalta Vista Wine Lodge (about \$261, in the Apalta horseshoe) or Hotel Viña La Playa (about \$240, an estate property with dining and tennis courts).

Day 9. A private tour at Clos Apalta, the seven-storey gravity-flow winery carved vertically into the granite hillside, then lunch five minutes away at Fuegos de Apalta in the Montes vineyards, Francis Mallmann's open-fire restaurant (reservations weeks ahead). Late afternoon, a horse-drawn carriage tour through the old Malbec blocks at Viu Manent, and a light dinner on the square in Santa Cruz.

Day 10. Breakfast at the hotel, loaner bicycles on the dirt paths through the vines, a final lunch at Viña Maquis between its two rivers, then the 2.5-hour drive back to Santiago airport for the late flight home, arriving three hours early to pack away any wine.

Driving notes for this option. Airport to valley on Ruta 5 Sur is low stress: a modern divided highway, right-hand driving, clear signage, and automated TAG tolls that the airport rental agencies include and bill to the card. Driving into central Santiago is a different matter (bus-lane cameras, rush-hour direction reversals, aggressive lane changes) and is avoided entirely in this plan. Two hard rules: Chile has a zero-tolerance blood alcohol law, so whoever drives does not taste, which means estate tours with walking or carriage transport, or a hired driver for the tasting afternoon; and luggage stays locked out of sight at rest stops, where distraction scams are a known pattern. Verdict: rent the car, but use it strictly as a shuttle between the airport and the valley roads.

Considered and set aside

Easter Island. On paper the strongest add-on, because Rapa Nui is only reachable from Santiago and the group is transiting Santiago anyway. LATAM flies it up to three times daily through April (about six hours out, four and a half back), April is shoulder season on the island, four to five days is the standard visit, and the all-in cost came to roughly \$1,300 to \$2,000 per person including park entry (about \$99) and the obligatory licensed guide. I priced it out fully, and the group's interest was not there. It adds a six-hour flight and four more days to a trip that already has plenty of both, so it is set aside.

Salta and northwest Argentina. Beautiful, but it puts everyone back at altitude, which defeats the point of ending gently.

Iquique and the Humberstone saltpeter works. Close to Calama, but thin for a multi-day stop.

My read: wine country if the group wants an ending, straight home if it wants an easy one. Colchagua is low effort, seasonally timed, and adds no long flights. Either way the choice decides the return routing, so it has to be settled before flights are booked.

Rough cost, per person

Three travelers, two rooms at Explora, two town nights plus four Explora nights. Directional only.

	PER PERSON
Flights, West Coast to Calama round trip	\$1,800 to \$2,100
Santiago buffer night	about \$100
Town hotel, 2 nights	about \$270
Town excursions, à la carte	about \$150
Explora, 4 nights, 2028 estimate	about \$3,300
Meals out, tips, incidentals	about \$300
Core trip	about \$5,900 to \$6,200
Add wine country, 2 to 3 nights	+ \$700 to \$1,100

The Travesía is separate, from about \$8,400 for seven nights plus that traveler's own flights.

Planning timeline

WHEN	WHAT
Late 2026	The Uyuni traveler confirms April and roughly which week. Everything else waits on this.
Early to mid 2027	Book the Travesía first, then Explora within days. Agree target dates as a group beforehand so the two bookings do not drift apart.
About May 2027	Book flights to Calama, about 11 months out. Price a single LATAM record through to Calama against the mixed-carrier options.
Summer 2027	A short trip to Colorado or similar as a preview of the altitude answer. A preview, not a gate.
Late 2027	Town hotel, and the Colchagua hotel if that is the choice. Low risk at this range.
Early 2028	À la carte town excursions; passports checked.

Open questions

These are what the next round of work has to answer, and they are listed here because a plan that hides its unknowns is worse than one that names them.

- Is the Uyuni traveler actually set on April? Her answer sets everyone's dates.
- Is Explora's May to August gap a closure or simply unpublished inventory? Their FAQ says the lodge runs year-round and the rate card lists May to September as quiet season, which points to unpublished. One email settles it, though April is right regardless.
- Does Explora's "stay longer" complimentary-night offer apply in quiet season? If the fifth night is free, the town-split economics shift back toward staying put.
- Which room category was the booking engine quoting at about \$1,000 per person?
- Wine country or straight home for the three who are not crossing. This changes the return routing and has to be decided before flights.

Where this stands

Nothing is booked, and nothing should be yet. What the first pass has settled is the shape: April, from the 6th; low town nights before the lodge; four Explora nights so the altitude ladder can be climbed in order; a split on day 8; and a short list of endings for the three who are not crossing, with a clear view of what each costs and which ones are already off the table. The next pass is the booking sequence, which starts with one traveler's answer about dates.

This is what the early stage of working with me looks like. The document gets sharper as decisions land, and it will be replaced here when it does.

Prepared by Kevin Rugg, **falco.travel**. Complex trips planned with you, not just for you. This is an early-stage planning draft: prices are published rates, proxies and ranges, not quotes, and they will change before this trip is booked.