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Chiloé

While most visitors to Chile head straight to Patagonia, this lesser-known island is where the country's real magic lies. By Chris Taylor.

The mystical art installation Muelle de los Almas (Pier of Souls)

Photography by Natasha Lee





“There’s no way to sugar-coat this,” my hiking guide tells me. “It will be a tad muddy.” He darts me an apologetic look, as if he were responsible for the recent rainstorms that have turned our walking trail into a barely navigable soupy slop. This isn’t just mud; it’s Passchendaele-level mud. Off the path ahead of me, I observe a horse whose hooves are buried so deep in the stuff that I wonder if he’ll ever live to take another step.

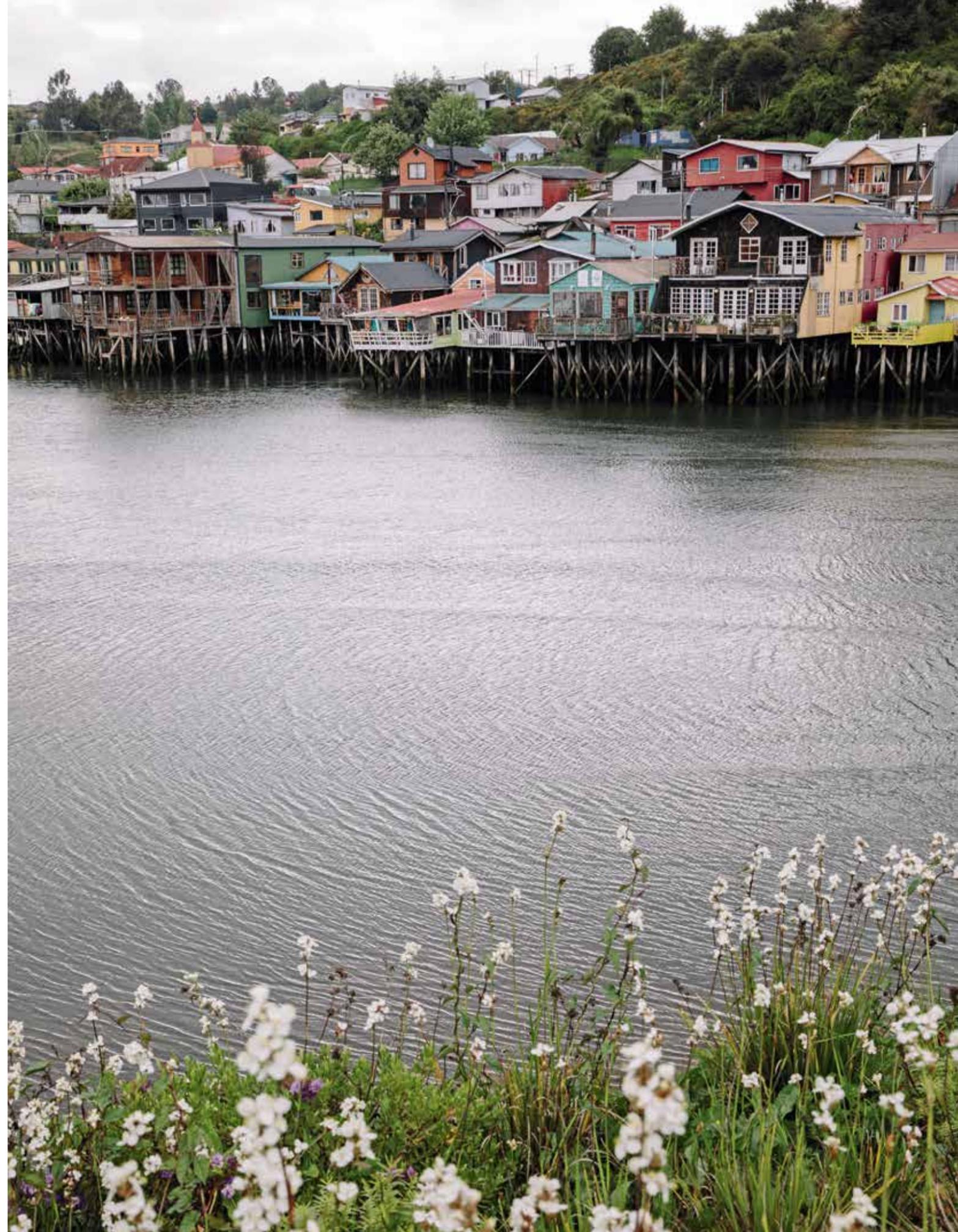
It serves me right, I suppose, for visiting Chiloé in the off-season. Located about 1200 kilometres south of Santiago and easily reached by a two-hour flight, this folklore-steeped island has long been a favourite destination for residents of the capital who come for the wild landscapes, stunning national parks and haunting archipelagos. Mostly, though, they come to experience a place where, unlike on the mainland, the cultural and culinary traditions are still impeccably preserved.

They’re also clever enough to mainly come in summer, when, I’m assured, the hiking trails look nothing like the Tough Mudder course I’m presently staring down. But I couldn’t come to Chiloé without laying eyes on the attraction that awaits me at the end of all this sludge: the landmark that’s been luring international travellers in the know to these otherwise unassuming shores.

The *Muelle de las Almas* (*Pier of Souls*) is a public-art wonder. An elevated boardwalk sculpture perched on a clifftop overlooking the Pacific Ocean, it dares all hikers who reach it to step onto its rickety timber boards and walk the 17-metre curved path towards oblivion.

It’s perhaps no surprise that a pier that leads into thin air has been attracting romantics and social media poseurs in equal numbers. But there’s no risk I’ll have to fight off the crowds today. As well as the shin-deep mud, the coastal air is thick with cloud so even if I reach the mystical pier, there’s every chance I won’t be able to see it, much less the sweeping ocean views on which the sculpture’s spell so heavily relies. Trudging on regardless, my guide and I negotiate a devilishly sharp descent on the fog-encased hillside.

Tierra Chiloé hotel (top and left) takes design cues from the island’s traditional timber stilt houses (right)





“Would you like to use a pole?” he asks me. “It can get a tad slippery here.”

A tad muddy. A tad slippery. My guide has a remarkable gift for understatement.

“No, thanks. I think I’m alright,” I reply, just as I plant my foot on a satiny piece of ground defiantly resistant to the grip of my boot. It sends me sideways with a thud, coating the entire right flank of my body in a muddy paste. I now look like a Top Deck chocolate bar with dark and light halves.

We gingerly plod the rest of the route and, roughly an hour after setting out, arrive at the lip of the cliffs where the hills meet the ocean. I don’t see the pier at first; the cloud cover is still so dense that it’s difficult to make out much at all. But as I inch my way towards it, I begin to decipher its pale, beckoning shape. There’s something a little eerie and not altogether unfitting about finding this unearthly structure so thoroughly cloaked in mist.

Crafted by Santiago-based sculptor Marcelo Orellana Rivera, the *Pier of Souls* not only pays homage to the omnipresent role of wood in Chilote culture – it’s difficult to find a house, church or boat that *isn’t* made of timber – but also honours the island’s rich indigenous mythology. Legend has it that a cantankerous ferryman called Tempilcahue once lived under such a pier, waiting to take the souls of the dead across the ocean to their final resting place.

As I step onto the pier, my guide tells me it’s customary for the dead to yell out “*Balsero!*” when they want to summon the ferryman for their ride to the afterlife. He encourages me to do likewise. I point out that, fatigued and mud-encrusted as I may be, I’m not yet technically dead. But he’s not taking no for an answer.

“*Balsero,*” I croak, my heart not completely in it, hardwired as I am to resist the charms of folklore.

“Say it louder,” he insists. “*Balsero! Balsero!*”

I walk to the very end of the pier, balancing on its final plank to nowhere with foolishly little regard for how far the fall would be if I took one more step. I truly feel like I’m floating.

“*Balsero!*” I yell.

And then something rather magical happens. The mist begins to lift. There’s an appreciable clearing of the clouds and, for the first time this morning, I can finally see the sea. It’s a spine-tingling moment. And I find it hard not to wonder – even just for a second – whether the timing was simply a fluke or the fabled forces of Chiloé were somehow also at play.

Returning to my hotel, the Tierra Chiloé, the manager, Eduardo, eyes me with

amusement. He offers at once to have my clothes and shoes cleaned, promising to have them delivered to my room the following morning.

“Thank you so much,” I reply. “It’s room number – ”

“Five, I know,” he says.

It’s typical of the astounding attention to detail that I experience throughout my stay here. The level of personalised service is trumped, perhaps, only by the building’s eye-popping design. Two long “floating” wings, angled like the hands of a clock, are suspended on stilts in a modern interpretation of the colourful stilt houses, or *palafitos*, that pepper the waterways of Chiloé, especially in the capital of Castro.

The original *palafitos* are mostly all unoccupied now but they still make for a striking splash of eccentricity along the banks of the Río Gamboa. Cunningly built over the water by fishermen who couldn’t afford to buy land, these 19th-century shacks often look no sturdier than a bunch of painted matchboxes balancing on toothpicks and yet they’ve miraculously survived everything the elements have thrown at them, including the devastating earthquake of 1960.



(Clockwise from right) Dine on fresh seafood and local vegetables at Tierra Chiloé; hike to the Pier of Souls; browse handmade woollens at restaurant and shop, Tradiciones Morelias

The architecture elsewhere on Chiloé is equally unique and defined by colour choices that aren’t exactly shy. No dwelling ever seems to be a sympathetic shade; garishness rules. But it has a way of growing on you.

On the final morning of my stay, I am in no hurry to leave the sun-drenched breakfast room overlooking Pullao Bay, where the waterbirds intermingle with seals and the mussel lines look like necklaces made by schoolkids in a craft class. I have time for a final excursion before my flight back to the capital. As part of its all-inclusive packages, Tierra Chiloé offers guests an impressive array of daily activities, including boat rides, horserides, kayaking, massages and trips to the island’s World Heritage-listed churches. But I feel like another hike.

Eduardo tips me off about a second timber pier artwork called *Muelle de la Luz* (*Pier of Light*). The brainchild of the same sculptor, it’s at the northern end of the island near the mouth of the Río Chepu.

“The only thing is,” Eduardo warns me, “they’ve had quite a bit of weather over that side lately. So it might be a tad muddy.”

I’ve seen the magic that Chiloé delivers. I don’t hesitate. ●