

CHILE

Summer on the slopes

Portillo pretty cool in August



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FIRST POSTED: SUNDAY, APRIL 01, 2012 12:00 AM EDT



The va et vient ski tows—also known as “slingshots”— are unique to Portillo. (PETER GILBERT/Special to QMI Agency)

It's a cruise ship kind of start to the day in Portillo, Chile. We wake up a little later than we would on a normal ski vacation -- but then, nothing about this "ski vacation" is normal. For one thing, it's August. For another, we're south of the equator.

We saunter into the communal dining room inside the giant yellow Hotel Portillo (pour-TEE-oh) for breakfast. Red-coated formal waiters are buzzing about like the hornets we've left back at our Muskoka cottage. The guests are an interesting mix: South American families dressed in some of the happiest skiwear I've seen -- shiny pink puffy jackets, lime-green ski pants, wide-framed jewel-encrusted sunglasses. Only slightly less staid are the North American skiers from New York, Vail, Whistler, Toronto and Aspen. I see a lot of Obermeyer and Kjus skiwear. Blonde hair. Deep tans. More sunglasses.

We click into our skis and push away from the slopeside hotel at the awesomely early hour of 10 a.m. Our first ride up the chairlift drops us at the summer training point of the Austrian national ski team. These enormous ski species are picking up speeds of about 70 kph as they whiz by, all duded out in their helmets and speed suits, race bibs sporting names like Franz, Hans and Josef.

We stop to watch, then ask a coach where they'll be training this afternoon.

"I hope vee don't train this afternoon," he says in perfect Austrian-accented English. "Vee have been verking since vile you vere sleeping."

We hang our heads and ski on, trying to rack up some kilometres of our own before we are totally embarrassed -- we are hearty Canadian skiers, after all.

The pistes of Juncalillo (YUNK-a-LEE-low) catch the most sun in a Portillo morning, so this is where most of us ride. We snake down the treeless groomed tracks first. In subsequent runs we get off-piste to ski the crud and small bumps -- it's quieter there. The bulk of South American skiers ride the groomed tracks, leaving the good stuff sweetly untouched and uncrowded.

By noon we've made our way to the Plateau -- the side of Portillo that catches the afternoon rays (locals claim 80% of Portillo's ski days are sunny). The terrain here is treeless and so vast, you would need a fisheye lens to capture it on camera. We ride the El Plateau lift, then the slingshot Condor -- a bizarre, four-person "va et vient" (come and go) ski tow you'll find nowhere else but Chile. Then we traverse over to the off-piste of Plateau Superior, largely avoided by the masses.

Not that there are any masses at Portillo, which is two hours into the Chilean Andes from Santiago, the closest major city. There are very few day skiers. Most people here are vacationing on ski weeks. Plus, Hotel Portillo is the only hotel at this ski resort, and capacity is capped at 450, so there's never a lift line-up. And if you like to ski off-piste, you encounter little traffic.

Lunch is at the mid-mountain Tio Bob's, aka Uncle Bob's. Bob Purcell was Portillo's original owner; his American nephew, Henry Purcell, now runs it. Tio Bob's is a little slopeside hut, much like the farm huts on the slopes of Europe. It offers hypnotic views of Laguna Del Inca (Lake of the Incas) and the surrounding snowcapped Andes. Skiers throw off their gear and take up sunny residence at picnic tables. Food is off the grill -- chicken, salmon, sausage, soup and enormous salads.

We don't want to leave our perch, but we have a date with some Mexican tour operators who promise to guide us through Garganta (translation: throat), akin to the Couloir at Whistler-Blackcomb. The sun-softened snow on Garganta is perfect, as is its pitch: Steep and slightly bumpy, just the way we like it.

Our ski day ends with a clandestine zip along the Austrians' closed downhill training course courtesy of Portillo's ski school director. It is all part of Portillo's daily Ski Ambassadors program, during which you're toured around for free by local experts.

By 5 p.m. it is time for tea in the dining room -- a civilized daily form of apres-ski -- followed by a nap, a late dinner, a lecture in the cinema, and maybe a visit to the hotel disco. For now though, afternoon tea and its accompanying Chilean sweet breads are very sweet caps on an extremely sweet day of summer skiing in Chile.

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IF YOU GO SKIING IN CHILE

GO

Air Canada runs regular direct, non-stop flights from Toronto to Santiago during the Chilean ski season, July-September. Other airlines offer flights from numerous North American cities. All-inclusive ski packages -- including hotel, meals, lifts and transfers -- for the ski-in/ski-out Hotel Portillo are sold through Canada's Merit Ski Vacations (meritskivacations.com) and Voyages Gendron (voyagesgendron.com).

WHERE

Ski Portillo has 14 lifts and a vertical drop of 762 metres. Hotel Portillo, at 2,880 metres above sea level, combines panoramic views of the Lake of the Incas and is nestled in the shadows of 5,700-metre Andean peaks. Hotel Portillo boasts a 1:1 guest-to-employee ratio, four meals per day, plus an onsite gym, outdoor heated pool and spa, disco, wine bar, games room, lounge, cinema and an evening adventure lecture series.

NEW

Portillo will hold its first Insider Camp -- a week-long program of coaching and guided skiing with Portillo experts -- Aug. 25-Sept. 1. Also new: A free night at Santiago's Ritz Carlton plus free transfers to Portillo during its annual Chilean Wine Week held the same week.

MORE INFORMATION

See skiportillo.com.

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