

# CHASING VOLCANOES

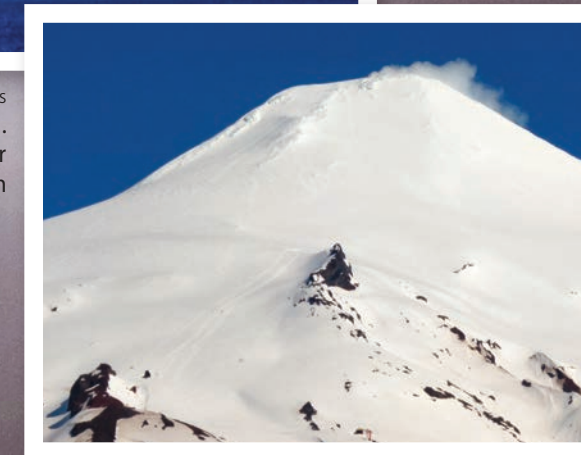
## KICK-STARTING THE SKI SEASON IN THE FAR SOUTH

STORY BY KARIN KIRK



PHOTOS BY RICH VINGLAS

Volcan Osorno, above, just beckons to be skied on. Volcan Villarrica, right, is a popular destination for climbers and skiers in Chile. It's an active volcano with a steady plume of steam rising from its summit.



DONNY ROTH  
A skier emerges from the clouds on Volcan Villarrica.

## FINALLY.

The click of a Dynafit binding has rarely been so satisfying. A year of planning, strategizing and flat-out worrying preceded this moment. Stepping into the skis and making the initial strides up the mountain, the endless decisions about how to train, what to wear, what flavor energy bars to bring are left behind, and now we're just here doing it. Finally.

The ascent begins easily, almost effortlessly as the nervous energy burns off. An air of easygoing celebration ripples through the group. Feeling the relaxed grip of climbing skins on sun-warmed snow, life is good. While all the other elements of this trip are unfamiliar: flip-flopping hemispheres and seasons, a culture and a language that I have no connection to and probably would never have visited otherwise, there remains a simple, comfortable allure: skiing.

Skiing on Chilean volcanoes offers a compelling combination of a spectacular setting, a true adventure in a wonderful culture, and a novel way to expand your horizons as a traveler and skier. But the real reason to come here is for the world-class skiing. These peaks

offer reliable snowpack, velvety corn snow and long, uncomplicated descents that make for phenomenal turns.

Volcan Osorno is a perfect, symmetrically smooth white cone. Imagine Mt. Fuji and you'll have the right idea. For something that looms so high over the landscape, there is nothing imposing about it. Pure white, without any rocks or cliffs, it retains an innocence that most tall mountains don't have. Osorno is the first of three volcanoes we'll ski on during a week-long ski mountaineering adventure, under the capable guidance of AMGA-certified ski guide and former Bridger Bowl instructor, Donny Roth. "If you can ski your way around Bridger Bowl, you're more than qualified to ski the volcanoes," explained Donny in our preliminary meetings. "And the rest, I'll teach you as we go along. You'll be challenged, but not terrified. You'll be tired, but not destroyed."

DONNY ROTH

Evening light illuminates the final pitch as the group wraps up an amazing day on Osorno.



Today's weather brings the kind of day that seems like an overwrought Photoshop job. An impossibly blue sky and painfully bright snow contrast with stark black lava fields. Receding below us are dense forests and the broad expanse of Lago Llanquihue; as we climb higher, neighboring volcanoes emerge on the horizon.

The first few hours pass easily. We skin up the slopes grinning to ourselves and feeling like the luckiest people on Earth. As we climb higher, the snow turns harder and the ascent more challenging. We can't just casually stride up anymore, and thus begins the educational portion of the day. Reliable kick turns, efficient skinning and the use of ski crampons are all part of the day's skills. We continue up, making good progress but with considerably more effort. Maybe 30 minutes of climbing pass until the snow becomes ice. It's beautiful, with a faceted, glassy effect. But prettiness aside, it's not particularly pleasant going and we gain an appreciation for ski crampons and the secure grip they afford.

As the snow gets increasingly difficult to penetrate even with crampons, Donny flirts with the icy surface for a few more steps, looks around, thinks for a moment, and reaches a decision that this is as high as we'll go today. After all, this is just the warm-up day and there is no pressure to do anything other than get a taste for what the week holds. So it's time to take off the skins, ski over to another aspect and head down.

The place where we switch from ascent to descent is a little awkward, made even more so by the firm snow. We're deliberate and careful as we go through the transition. But still, there is no mistaking the satisfying feeling of locking into downhill mode, cinching up the backpack straps, and casting those first, strategic glances down the hill instead of up it. The first turns are on lumpy, chattery ice. But here we are on the flank of a volcano, so even crappy turns are novel and fun. And in those initial moments, a certain sense of energy radiates out from the ski edges. Perhaps I've never been more psyched for a ski run in my entire life.



KARIN KIRK

Guide Donny Roth points out the route up Mocho-Choshuenco



DONNY ROTH

One of those rare moments of absolute skiing perfection. Carefree turns on the lower slopes of Osorno, with Volcán Calbuco in the background.

Donny wraps around the volcano's cone in a long, long traverse. Until he disappears. We follow, winding around to the mountain's northern flank. It took me a moment to realize that in the Southern Hemisphere a north-facing slope is the same thing as a south-facing slope at home. Meaning the sun was basking the slope, subduing the icy surface and producing soft, secure corn snow.

"Ready?" says Donny, who skis away without fanfare. Donny is an exceptional skier so watching his turns does little to reveal the conditions. I begin my descent and am immediately lured into the fun of the corn snow. Notwithstanding that these are my first turns since May. Notwithstanding anything... holy cow... this is AMAZING.

The volcano's topography is a smooth, tilted plane — relatively featureless. The snow could not be easier. The sky is brilliant blue. You can see forever. Literally there is not one factor that makes the skiing complex or intimi-



DONNY ROTH

And you thought just climbing and skiing an active volcano was exciting enough? Just wait until you get a peek down inside that steaming crater.

dating in any way. You can let it *rip*. So I did. Bigger turns, faster turns, long, lazy turn transitions that allow momentum to build before arcing the skis back

across the fall line. Woohoo! We make a quick stop to catch breath and exchange "Can you believe we are doing this?" smiles. But Donny is below us, there is more to ski. Lots more. Off we go, amazing, flying down the slope without a care in the world. Adrenalin off the charts. By the time I reach Donny I am manic. He nods understandingly, having led dozens of skiers to this alpine nirvana.

Literally every turn until we reach the volcanic sand at snow's end was thrillingly good. As we near the edge of the snow, we converge with a gathering of local Chileans out playing in the snow. They're sliding around, throwing snowballs and clearly having an excellent time of it. We weave through them, everyone laughing, everyone just out enjoying Volcán Osorno looking down on us. We're all unified in celebrating the simple joy of sliding downhill on snow.

And to think, that was just the first day. What could possibly top that?

The week continued with a blend of adrenaline-induced skiing, colorful lessons in Chilean slang, and an adventure-filled road trip winding

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RICH VINGLAS AND KARIN KIRK

After a three-hour drive through increasingly remote territory, it was a surprise to find such cheerful accommodations at Huilo-Huilo Nature Preserve.

through tiny villages, thick forests, hot springs and expansive lakes, all under the watchful supervision of one or more volcanoes occupying the horizon. Donny's love for the experience was easily contagious, and his decade of guiding in this region has given him an intimate knowledge of these volcanoes, along with an understanding of the nuances of the travel, access and culture that make the difference between a carefree day and a missed opportunity.

While skiing was the focus of the trip, the warmth and good-natured humor of the Chileans was an unexpected treat. The interplay of the easygoing culture and the intensity of the skiing created an ideal balance

that allowed us to push our limits on the mountains, then completely relax once we rejoined civilization below the snowline.

At the tiny Temuco airport, reluctant footsteps carry me up the airplane ramp. As a skier, traveler and athlete, this has been a pinnacle experience. Luckily, only a few short weeks stand between arrival back in Bozeman and the first powder days of pre-season ski touring. I can keep skiing up mountains and searching for that carefree stash of powder that induces the same rush we got while nuking down Volcan Villarrica. And even though I know I'll never replicate that experience, I am happy to keep trying. ♦

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Good Luck MSU Skiers!

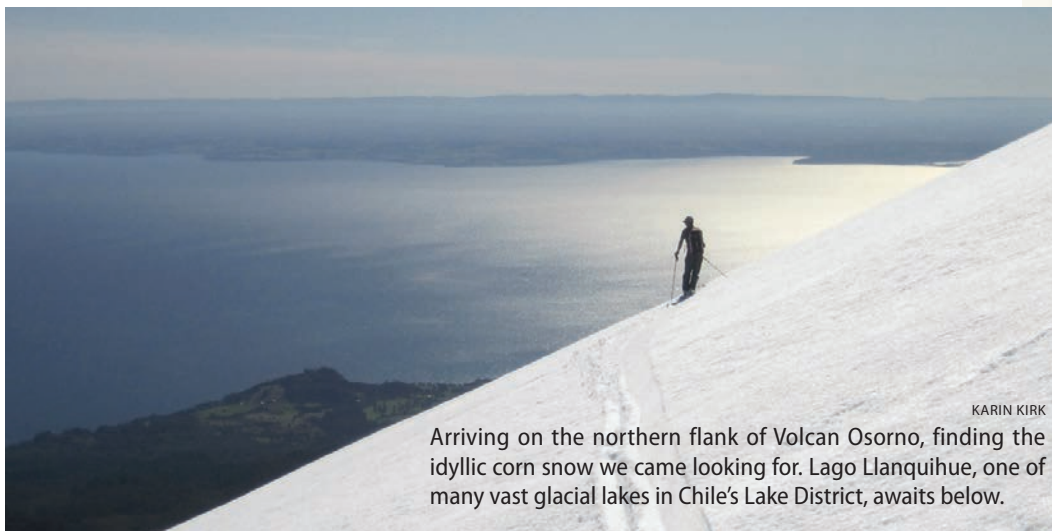
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KARIN KIRK

Arriving on the northern flank of Volcan Osorno, finding the idyllic corn snow we came looking for. Lago Llanquihue, one of many vast glacial lakes in Chile's Lake District, awaits below.

## VOLCANO PROFILES

**1 VOLCAN OSORNO, 8,701 feet**  
Volcan Osorno is 600 miles south of Santiago, sitting just northeast of Puerto Montt, which is the gateway to the Patagonian region. The volcano stands sentinel over Lago Llanquihue, one of many vast glacial lakes in this region. A serpentine, but paved, access road leads to a quaint ski area, which serves only the bottom of the mountain. Osorno serves up about 3,500 vertical feet of idyllic skiing. The summit cone is steep, lumpy rime ice and is typically accessed with crampons and a good dose of perseverance.

The surrounding area is gorgeous and sparsely populated. Accommodations are in nearby Vicente Pérez Rosales National Park. We stayed in a cabin on a black sand beach at the edge of the spectacular Todos los Santos lake.

**2 MOCHO-CHOSHUENCO, 7,946/7,923 feet**  
The twin-peaked volcanoes of Mocho and Choshuenco are tucked away in the remote Huilo-Huilo nature preserve. These volcanoes don't give up their secrets easily, as they are not only quite literally in the middle of nowhere, but their access is only gained by passing through an elaborate yet whimsical gatehouse that is straight of the *Wizard of Oz*. Special permits (and a bit of cajoling, it seemed) are required but that is all part of the service provided by our guide.

Once past the gate and up the access "road," it was evident that the terrain was borne of volcanic events. Layers of lava rock have been torn into gullies and chasms, and are capped by an explosion crater with jagged walls hewn from basalt. On the upper mountain, the topography softens to yield friendly bowls with the occasional volcanic cinder cone

around the edges. No, you won't mistake this landscape for Beehive Basin. Both the climbing and skiing are straightforward, making for a totally enjoyable experience despite the rugged surroundings.

Accommodations in Huilo-Huilo are either in surprisingly sleek, contemporary cabins with private wood-fired hot tubs, or in one of several lodge buildings that spring from the Earth in whimsical forms and are connected by elevated boardwalks. One way or another, this is a spot you won't likely forget.

**3 VOLCAN VILLARRICA, 9,341 feet**  
Regardless of how many mountains you've skied on or hiked up, I bet you haven't seen one quite like this. Volcan Villarrica is a peak made especially attractive by its constant plume of steam billowing out of the conical summit. Upon completion of the 5,000-foot ascent, skiers and climbers are greeted by the exhilarating experience of peering straight down into the throat of the active crater. Once you've snapped a few hundred pictures of this remarkable sight, there is nearly a vertical mile of intensely fun skiing to look forward to. Villarrica's slopes are a consistent, 30-35 degree pitch, making for a steady effort on the 5-hour ascent and delightfully rewarding carving all the way down. Because of the scale and iconic nature of this mountain, it serves as the ideal exclamation point on a journey that, quite honestly, is already pretty well populated with exclamation points.

Villarrica is located near Pucón, which is a bustling mountain town with a vibrant atmosphere, a beautiful lake and plenty of options for food and drink.

*Karin Kirk is a Bridger Bowl ski instructor, Ridge guide and staff trainer. She is already working on finding a way to get back to the Andes.*



CHRIS KERR/GGRAPHIC

## IF YOU GO ...

### GUIDING

Some aspects of this trip are doable without a guide, but the routefinding, permits, and access on each volcano are already optimized with a guide. We used **Chile Powder Adventures**, led by Donny Roth. <http://www.chile-powder-adventures.com>

Trips are customizable by ability level, group size and duration. A standard 8-day trip includes time on three peaks and costs \$2,500 per person for a 4-person group. Everything is included: Ground transportation, top-notch lodging, guiding, avalanche safety gear, permits, and all meals.

### AVALANCHE HAZARD

Minimal due to a strong springtime snowpack. Nonetheless, beacon practice is part of the first day of the trip and routefinding and daily decision-making reflect best practices of backcountry travel.

### HOW HARD IS IT?

Typical ski days include 3,500 – 5,000 vertical feet of ascent, which is a mixture of skinning, skinning with ski crampons, and climbing with boot crampons and skis on your pack. Climbing is done at a calm, sustainable pace, with short rest breaks every hour. The altitude is similar to that of our local mountains.

### WEATHER CONDITIONS

As with most trips in the mountains, the weather can be a confounding factor. The Pacific can bring in tremendous rainstorms, and soupy fog can obliterate any attempt at skiing. But in the southern-hemisphere springtime, bluebird days predominate. Most week-long trips wind up having at least one down day due to weather. With any luck, those days correspond with the times when some rest is needed anyway.

The volcanoes season is early September through mid-October.