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High Society: Skiing in Portillo, Chile

This mountain outpost is a living tribute to what skiing used to be.

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Here are the key things to know:

The skiing is great: It is often compared to Jackson Hole, though it is above the tree line and more compact with incredible terrain for all levels. Extraordinary off-piste skiing is reachable with or without hiking, and the Roca Jack is one of the world's great runs. The powder is Colorado quality, and the weather in mid-August is comparable to early spring: 20-35 degrees and tons of sun. This is a free ski haven where you also get to run gates, (see below).

The hotel and mountain: There is only one hotel, and it's legendary. There's not much else there - which is a huge part of the appeal. If you're looking for an Aspen experience where there's a town around a ski area, this isn't the place. Instead, it's comparable to a cruise...The hotel only holds about 450 people, and those are the people with you from Saturday to Saturday. No one else. That means you have a world class ski area that you're sharing with 450 others. No lift lines. No hassles. Great service. So while you may know no one at the start of the week, you'll know many by the end of the week if you want to. Yet you can also be left alone there without a problem if you prefer. Most importantly, it's a very relaxed place where you can spend high quality time as a family.

Racers: The US and Austrian World Cup teams usually train in Portillo in August and September. In the past, guests have skied with several US team members including Darron Rahlves, Julia Mancuso, Steve Nyman and Kirstin Clark, Austria's Michael Walbrecht, and Slovenia's Tina Maze, plus extreme skiers like Chris Davenport, Ingrid Backstrom and Warren Miller's crews who often film in Portillo). The World Cup teams train GS, Super G and Downhill in the mornings, then they are in and around the hotel the rest of the day. That's at one end. At the other, you have lots of regular families from the States, Europe and South America who are just there to enjoy skiing at all levels.

The package: For a fixed price per person, you get 8 days of skiing, 7 nights in the hotel, 4 meals a day (afternoon tea is the extra one). All you pay for on top of that are alcohol, lessons, transportation to/from the airport, meals outside the hotel, spa treatments and a race.

Typical day: Wake up, put on your ski clothes, enjoy a white tablecloth breakfast. 9:30 meet for lessons or free ski. (The ski school has some of the world's best instructors including Mike Rogan and Robin Barnes, so people at all levels tend to take

lessons). Ski until noon, (they usually have a free race course set up for all guests). White table cloth lunch (or eat at Tio Bob's on the mountain). Afternoon – ski/hang out/workout/ hike/etc. 4:00 tea. Siesta – swim outdoors, fall asleep reading a book in the hotel's "family room", hang out. 7:00 or 8:00 meet for drink before dinner. 8:00 or 9:45 dinner – fantastic food and great wines. After dinner – family room, bar, disco. Sleep. Do again the next day!

Race course: This is not a Mount Hood race camp where you can set courses. However, a GS course is set most days and is available at no extra cost. Run it as many times as you'd like. On Thursday, there is a race open to all guests, and it's great fun. Afterwards they host a great party with awards for all ages.

Other guests: You never know who will be seated right next to you, but if they're famous, you can't tell and they don't really care. It's totally comfortable and relaxed for all. The person next to you might be an Olympic medalist, a current or former World Cup racer, a major political figure from South America, the US Ambassador, a Wall Street player, or some family from wherever that just wanted to ski in Chile and put their pennies aside to do so.

Kids: Totally kid friendly. Day care is part of the fixed price and they have kids' activities each day in addition to skiing. Ski instructors are multi-lingual and gifted. The food is great for kids too. And if you leave your kids in the room after dinner and go to the bar or disco, they have staff on each floor who quietly keep an eye on them and will alert you if there's problem.

Travel: Super easy. Depart from the States at about 10:30 pm on Friday and land in Santiago around 8:00 am. Take the hotel's shuttle to Portillo (about a 2 hours drive). Check in by noon. Take your first runs of the week at 1:00 pm. Reverse the pattern for the Saturday night return flight from Santiago.

Other things to do: It's an extraordinary country with sublime geography and wonderful people. Henry also has hotels in Atacama, Chiloe and Patagonia that you can find through www.tierrahotels.com.



SKI PORTILLO
THE SPIRIT OF THE ANDES