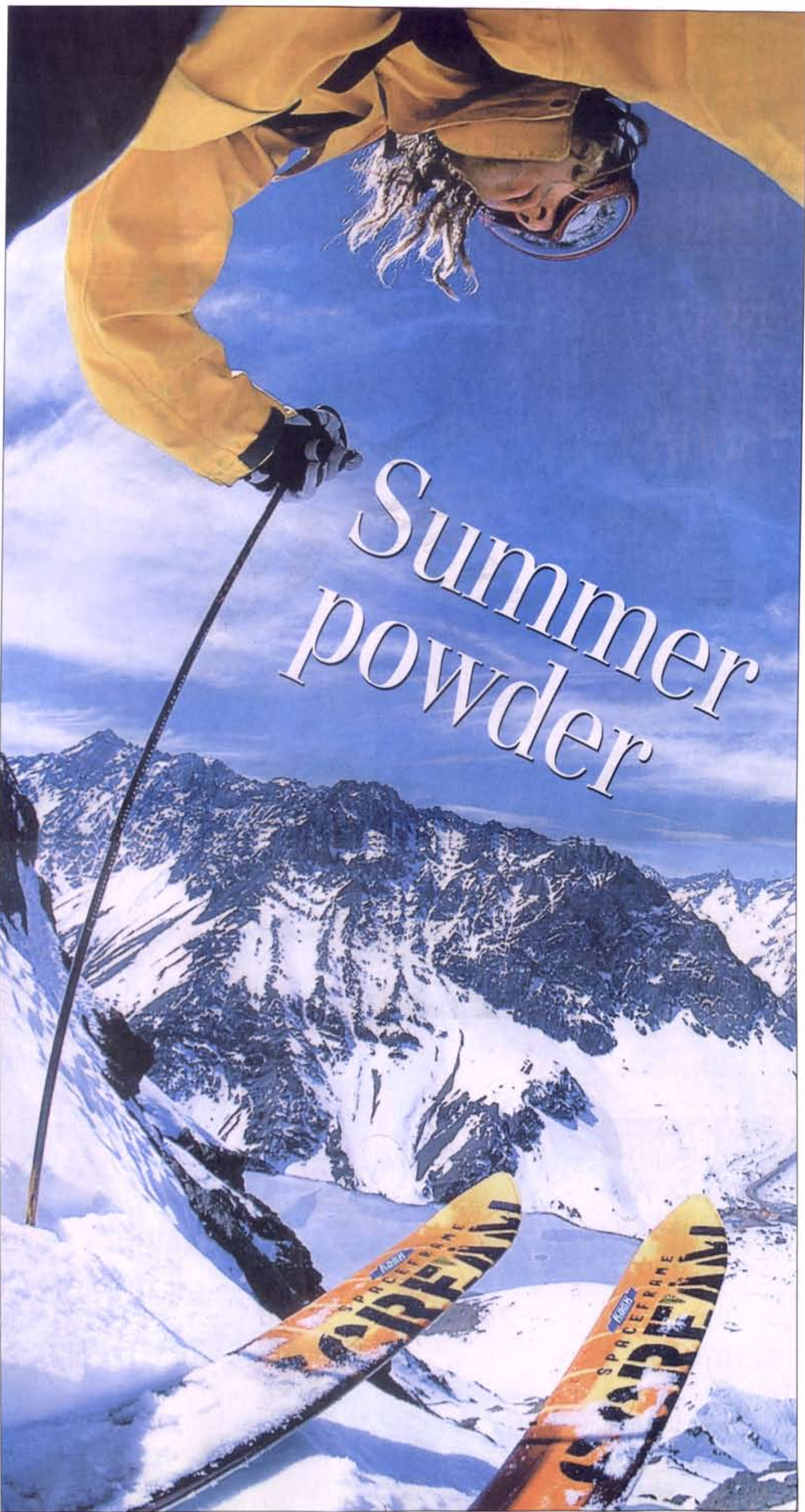


# Globe Travel



CHRISTOFFER SIOSTROM

**MARK LASSETER** hits the slopes at three of South America's top ski resorts, and finds all the fresh tracks, sublime scenery and wild nightlife he can handle

**'S**o, how many times have you been in a helicopter?" I asked one of my fellow heli-skiers as we took in another stunning view of Chile's Valle Nevado Ski Resort.

"This would be about a hundred for me now," he replied, grinning. "You?"

"Um, this is the first," I admitted.

"Don't worry," he said. "As soon as we drop down over this ridge in a few seconds, it will be all good."

My stomach, for its part, did not consider the drop to be "all good." In fact, I was quite pleased to be standing on terra firma a few moments later. But this feeling of security quickly changed to excitement as I gazed down a pristine chute hidden from chair lifts and other skiers. My guide, Canadian-Chilean heli-skiing guru Matt Pinto, skied ahead, gave me the go ahead, and I glided through the soft South American snow.

It was some of the best skiing I had ever experienced — in August. While my friends back in Whistler were refilling their coolers and refuelling their barbecues, I was extending the ski season in style in the Southern Hemisphere.

And I still got a great tan — Andean resorts see more sunshine than their North American counterparts, and several slope-side hotels feature heated outdoor pools. Not to mention great wine and cuisine, as well as uncrowded slopes that let visitors get more than their money's worth. And when you return to the office in September, there's nothing quite like bragging about the knee-deep powder you plied all weekend.

The following three ski resorts — Valle Nevado and Portillo in Chile, and Las Lenas in Argentina — serve up the finest slopes South America has to offer.

#### Valle Nevado

There are three main things that make skiing at Valle Nevado memorable: the only half-pipe in South America; the aforementioned heli-skiing, which is the continent's best and is much less expensive than in North America; and, finally, the road runs.

Road runs? When there is enough snow, you can ski out of bounds to a multitude of chutes and bowls that deposit you along the switchback road system that leads up to the resort. All you need to get back to the resort is a thumb and a smile. Just be sure to say "gracias."

After my exhilarating heli-ski excursion, I headed straight from the chopper to the Hotel Puerta Del Sol, grabbed my bathing suit and made for the heated outdoor pool.

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■ SKI RESORTS IN SUMMER, R9

The steepest and most exciting descent at Portillo is the infamous Super C Couloir. A four-hour hike above the lifts is rewarded with a 1,200-vertical-metre trip down a mountain chute.

# Seemingly unlimited out-of-bounds options

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Valle Nevado also lays claim to the most spectacular sunsets of any South American ski resort, and with a cold, Cristal *chopp* (South American draft beer) in my hand, things were indeed "all good."

## Portillo

After four days in Valle Nevado, I descended by van to Santiago, Chile's capital, en route to Portillo Ski Resort. After a two-hour drive up some of the country's more thrilling switchbacks, I immediately cooled off in my hotel's pool. Basking in the sun, I took in the view of Inca Lake — my favourite poolside vista in the world — which separates Portillo's two main faces.

It was suddenly brought to my attention that South America's first-ever snowboard quarter-pipe competition was about to kick off at the base of the resort. This was the first of many on-hill activities and parties that made up Friends and Singles Week (which runs Aug. 21-28 in 2004). The event featured a DJ, free beer and, most importantly, Chilean, Brazilian and Argentine snowboarders giving it up for the crowd.

After a day of lounging, I hit the slopes on Day 2. Despite a reputation for being smaller and gentler than the major Andean resorts, with a large groomed area for beginners and intermediates, Portillo also has great heli-skiing, steep terrain with challenging chutes and wide off-piste trails such as the spectacular lake runs that drop onto ice-covered Inca Lake. The steepest and most exciting descent at Portillo is the infamous Super C Couloir. A four-hour hike above the lifts is rewarded with a 1,200-vertical-metre trip down a chute, with great views of Aconcagua's peak.

What sets Portillo apart from other resorts are its intimate slopes — with just one full-service hotel, there are no lift lines and everyone gets to know each other. Families are welcomed with kids-ski-free weeks, an excellent ski school and accommodating resort staff.

After tackling the Super C, it was time to check out more of the Singles Week après-ski events. To kick

## Pack your bags

### GETTING THERE

Air Canada offers weekly direct flights to Santiago and Buenos Aires, the best arrival points for ski trips to Chile and Argentina.

Canadian tour operators offering ski trips to South America include: **Southamericaski.com Vacations:** Whistler, B.C.; 1-888-754-1754, [www.southamericaski.com](http://www.southamericaski.com).

**Extremely Canadian:** 1-800-938-9656; [www.extremelycanadian.com](http://www.extremelycanadian.com).

### WHEN TO GO

The South American ski season runs from mid-June to early October.

### WHERE TO STAY

**Hotel Puerta del Sol:** Valle Nevado; [www.vallenevado.com](http://www.vallenevado.com); 56 (2) 477 7700.

**Hotel Portillo:** 1-800-514-2579; [www.skiportillo.cl](http://www.skiportillo.cl).

**Hotel Escporio:** Las Lenas; 54 (261) 429 9953; [laslenasski.com](http://laslenasski.com). A four-star slope-side property.

### RESORT INFORMATION

**Valle Nevado:** [vallenevado.com](http://vallenevado.com). Vertical drop: 762 metres; top elevation: 3,659 metres; lifts: nine. Located 60 kilometres east of Santiago.

**Portillo:** [www.skiportillo.com](http://www.skiportillo.com). Vertical drop: 758 metres; top elevation: 3,348 metres; lifts: 12. Located 150 kilometres from Santiago, 225 kilometres from Mendoza.

**Las Lenas:** 1-888-SKI-1SKI; [www.laslenasski.com](http://www.laslenasski.com). Vertical drop: 1,230 metres; top elevation: 3,431 metres; lifts: 11. Located 400 kilometres from Mendoza, 1,186 kilometres from Buenos Aires.

### MORE INFORMATION

For general information on skiing in Chile and Argentina, visit [goski.com](http://goski.com) and [southamericaskiguide.com](http://southamericaskiguide.com).

things off, a Hawaiian party by the Hotel Portillo's pool featured drinks, music and decorations that would do Don Ho proud.

We were then treated to the first of several sumptuous dinners in the hotel's elegant dining room. Each



RODRIGO SALAS

The view from Hotel Portillo's pool takes in Inca Lake and the surrounding mountains.

## Ski South America



THE GLOBE AND MAIL

crowd assembled in the hotel's lounge was treated to some of the hottest and latest Chilean fur and bikini fashion trends — not to mention some alluring Chilean models.

## Las Lenas

The next day, I bid *adios* to Portillo and revisited the van for a four-hour ride to the city of Mendoza in Argentina, where I would switch vehicles and head for the Las Lenas ski resort. My days were never off to an early start, what with the ski hill being open until 6 p.m., and Las Lenas having the best nightlife of any ski resort in South America — it only really gets going at 1 a.m. and winds down at sunrise.

I spent a week hiking to some of the best backcountry skiing in the region and taking snow-cat rides to hidden bowls. On Torecillas Peak, for instance, an abundance of snow, striking scenery and the 3,400-metre elevation left me breathless. And when I needed a change of pace in the afternoons, there were always the soft groomed and marked trails.

Las Lenas has ample wide and flat runs for beginners and intermediates, but its steep chutes, couloirs and wide-open bowls deservedly get most of the attention. Skiers in the know say the resort offers the most lift-accessed terrain in the world, with seemingly unlimited out-of-bounds options just seconds from its lifts.

After a week with no snowfall, it came: one of the legendary Santa Rosa storms. Being the saint she is, Santa Rosa helped out Valle Nevado and Portillo as well, but hit Las Lenas hard for two days.

We were treated to the best week of the 2003 season, with sunny skies and powder at every turn. My Australian friend Mo Rasiah, who had endured a long, frustrating season of little snow, had his birthday wish come true. His comments sum it up best: "That was my best birthday ever, and best ski day ever. I would fly from anywhere in the world to ski this place when it is like this, even just for a day."

No argument here.

night, dishes highlighting Argentina's wonderful beef and lamb were complimented by an array of Chilean wines.

After dinner, it was time for one of the best events of the week: the fur and bikini fashion show. The