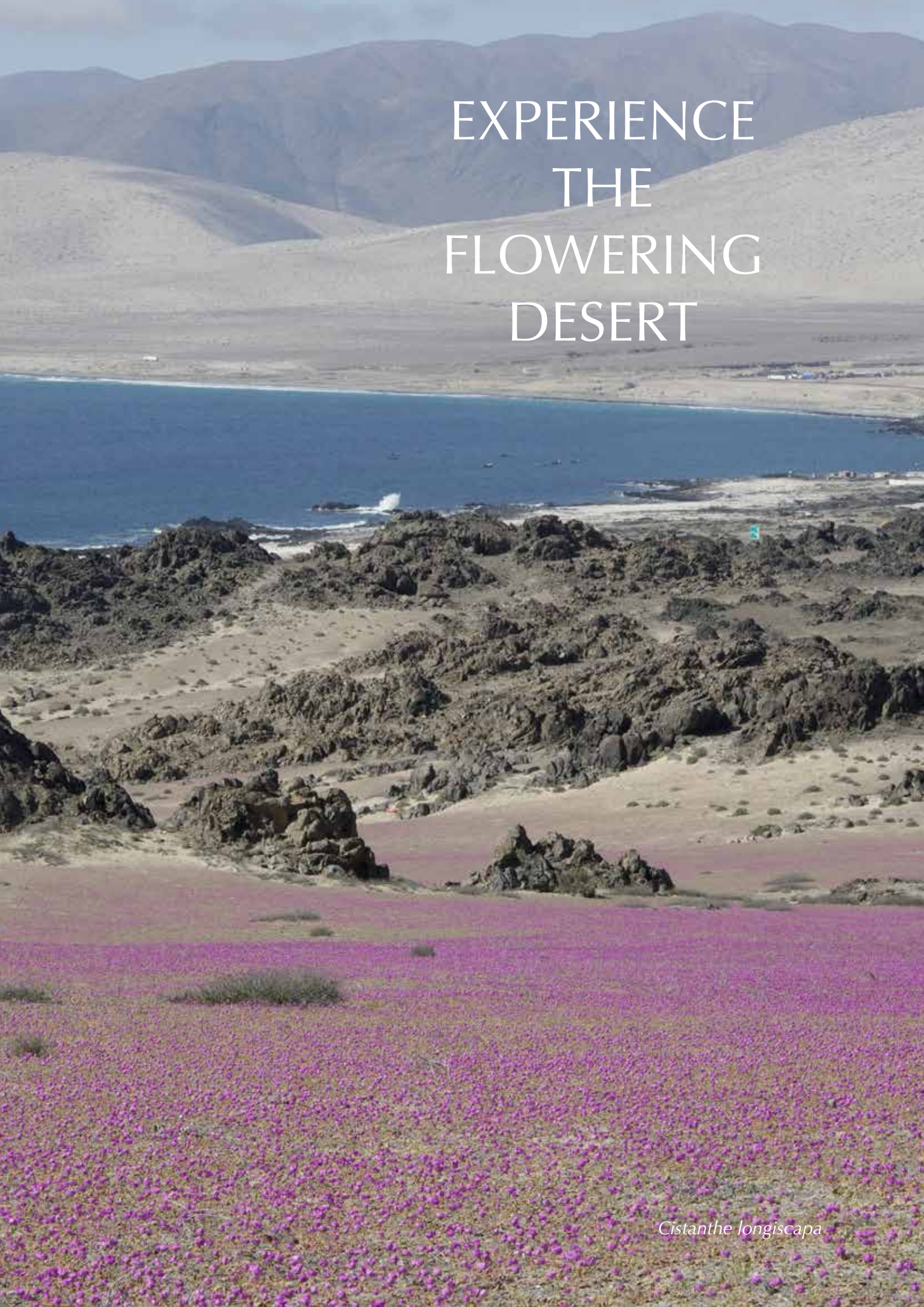


# EXPERIENCE THE FLOWERING DESERT



*Cistanthe longiscapa*



Pan de Azucar

Every so often an event occurs that surpasses expectation. Whispers about this year's rain in the southern Atacama eventually became more definite fact and we took the opportunity/risk to organise a trip to see this rare spectacle. Anyone arriving into Antofagasta last month might have been a touch concerned at the endless dry hills and sandy plains. Indeed, our trip began with a view across the crumpled coastal ranges down to the cloud sea that filled the lower valleys. The coastline of Paposo was impressive and the populations of *Copiapoa cinerea* subsp. *haseltoniana* fabulous, but there was not much in flower. This was to prove an interesting contrast between what followed. These very same dry areas can look utterly different following rain. Half way through the next day the flowering desert began to reveal just how different. *Heliotropium pycnophyllum* bushes were completely smothered in flowers that it was hard to see any leaves and the slopes were generously sprinkled with dainty white *Leucocoryne appendiculata*. The viewpoint along the coast was magnificent. A hundred miles further down the road and every bush



*Heliotropium pycnophyllum*





*Cistanthe longiscapa* (pink) & *Nolana baccata* (white)



*Leucocoryne narcissoides*



*Nolana acuminata* & *Heliotropium linariifolium*



*Alstroemeria violacea*

was blooming, golden *Argylia radiata* was popping up everywhere, the sandy plains were so green I was asked what they grew in them – mainly sand. I've seen these areas in dry years and the contrast is stark.

A fantastic valley where the slopes were white with a form of *Nolana acuminata* interspersed with amber *Heliotropium linariifolium* and spectacular *Alstroemeria violacea* bursting from among the rocks was followed by octopoid limbs of *Oxalis gigantea* swathed in yellow flowers and a sheet of the iconic pink *Cistanthe longiscapa* stretching down slope to the sweeping coastline below. The vast plains were fast colouring up and one entire mountain was wrapped in a blanket of pink and white bands embellished with stripes of gold. This grand display stretched for miles, the deep pink of *Cistanthe longiscapa* blending with lilac *Cristaria* and then yielding to broad white brush strokes of *Nolana baccata*. The gold was provided by the thousands of *Argylia radiata*, each stem topped by big trumpet



*Argylia radiata*





*Astroemeria philippii* (above)

flowers. The desert 'snow' continued with drifts of *Leucocoryne narcissoides* and jaw dropping expanses of *Nolana baccata* that extended to the horizon. Other places were dressed with the varied soft blues of *Zephyra elegans*, everything laid on in uncountable numbers. It is hard to convey the extent of the flowering, these displays often continued for miles, repeated again and again. One almost became blasé about the whole thing until one recalled the first day in the desert.

Other gullies were choked with flamboyant *Alstroemeria philippii* and the brimstone cups of *Balbisia peduncularis* amidst billowing cerise *Mirabilis elegans*, whilst the impressive multiheaded domes of *Copiapoa dealbata* grew amidst and exploding sea of intense pink *Cistanthe grandiflora* just beyond the shore of the Pacific. Blood-red *Bomarea ovallei* was found, more fine cacti and then over the hills we discovered a lovely trio of tropaeolums, all rushing to bloom in these few benign weeks.



*Schizanthus candidus* & *Mirabilis elegans*



*Balbisia peduncularis* (above)

*Zephyra elegans* (left)



*Copiapoa dealbata* & *Cistanthe grandiflora*



*Cistanthe grandiflora*





*Trolaeoum kingii* (above)



*Leucostele (Echinopsis) skottsbergii*



*Trolaeoum azureum* (above)  
*Zephranthes phycelloides* (left)

Scarlet trumpets of *Zephranthes (Rhodophiala) phycelloides* and tangerine forms of *Argylia radiata* were sprinkled throughout and every bush of *Cordia decandra* was encased in white flowers. Draped across the bushes in one canyon was the subtle beige beauty of *Tropaeolum kingii*, followed by the showier white-centre violet-blue of *T. azureum*. A final flourish of all the desert flowers saw us leave the Atacama proper and descend into the Mediterranean climate zone, this also disarmingly green. Here every shrub was dripping the lava hues of *Tropaeolum tricolor*. A few triumphant spikes of *Puya bertroniana*, the flowers an indescribable blue-green completed that day. If we thought, we had seen bulb displays up to this point we were wrong.

Our penultimate day will live long in the memory as a bulb feast that is hard to match. Drifts of *Schizanthus splendens* set us up for fields of *Leucocoryne coquimbanensis*, the land punctuated by stately *Leucostele skottsbergii* cacti, each bearing big white trumpet flowers and the hills beyond painted golden-yellow by the simply vast displays of *Loasa tricolor*. The gilding continued throughout as we

*Loasa tricolor*







*Tropaeolum hookerianum*  
subsp. *austropurpureum*



*Tropaeolum tricolor*



*Puya bertroniana*



*Zephranthes bagnoldii* with *Leucocoryne*  
*purpurea* and *Nolana acuminata*





*Leucocoryne purpurea*



*Leucocoryne coquimbensis* & *Cryptogramma* sp.

travelled along the main road, the side frequently covered in thick drifts of *Leucocoryne*. Sandy flats had countless *L. purpurea*, a particularly attractive species and these (and other species) filled very back yard, open space and roadside verge in a mind-blowing display. I do not exaggerate; they were truly uncountable. One area had hundreds of sulphurous *Zephyranthes* (*Rhodophiala*) *bagnoldii* bursting from a dense carpet of *Nolana acuminata*. Moving away from this might have brought some respite, but the hills nearby were bursting with the most sensational displays of *Alstroemeria magnifica* I have ever seen, mainly white but with deeper pink forms, there was scarcely a spent flower it was so perfect. To finish a day of visual overload, where deciding where to point the camera becomes mute and one needs to simply sit and take it all in we sat on rocks amidst endless drifts of thousands of a handsome blue form of *Leucocoryne coquimbensis*, trying to assimilate that this abundance was being repeated hundreds of times over for miles along the coast.

*Alstroemeria magnifica*







*Eriogyne chilensis*



Our brains needed a rest, the drier hills inland offered less floral vastness, but we found jewels hidden away, none more so than the exquisite wine-red *Phycella* (*Placea*) *amoena* that decorated the stunted matorral scrub and the pretty mauve bells of *Tropaeolum hookerianum* subsp. *austropurpureum* that laced the roadside shrubs. Time was pressing and it was somewhat distressing to drive past the flowery masses along the coast, every white *Bahia ambrosoides* in bloom with drifts of rich pink *Schizanthus carlomunozii* in between, but there were some early season delights we had to see. Namely; *Bipinnula fimbriata*, an extraordinary green and white orchid with fimbriate sepals. And right on the coast the first flowers of *Alstroemeria peregrina* were open, near cliffs peppered with pink-flowered *Eriogyne chilensis* cacti as foamy breakers crashed on the rocks below.

This had been a breathless ten days of flowers, landscapes, fine wine and plenty of laughs.

*Bipinnula fimbriata*



*Phycella amoena*





*Lilium pardalinum* subsp. *vollmeri*