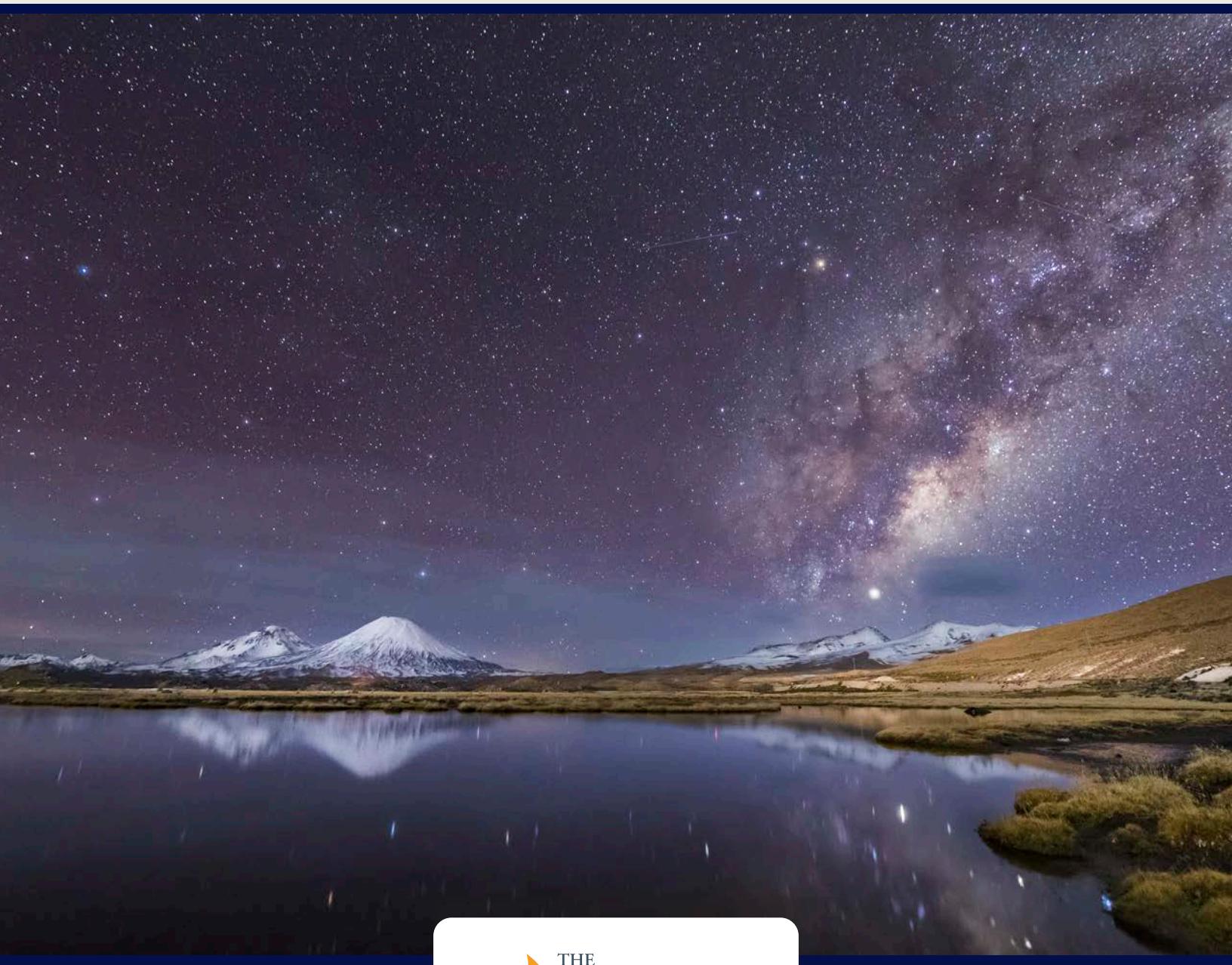


Astronomer's Alley: Chile's Atacama Desert

with Dr. Sarah Rugheimer (Nov. 2026, Feb. 2027)

or Dr. Ed Murphy (Nov. 2027)

November 2–8, 2026 | February 5–11, 2027 | November 28–December 4, 2027



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with Dr. Sarah Rugheimer (Nov. 2026, Feb. 2027)
or Dr. Ed Murphy (Nov. 2027)

Join your Great Courses Journeys expert on an eye-opening and jaw-dropping exploration of the Atacama Desert, the driest desert in the world. With more than 300 cloud-free days each year and virtually no light pollution, the Atacama is one of the few places on earth where you can observe the Andromeda Galaxy with the naked eye. Watch a spectacular sunset in the Valley of the Moon before immersing yourself in the beauty of the desert sky in a private session with a local astronomer and astrobiologist.

Explore the otherworldly desert terrain where scientists tested the first prototypes of the Mars rover. Visit the Tatio geyser field, where more than 80 active geysers erupt against a backdrop of volcanic peaks, and view wildlife at the National Flamingo Reserve. (Note that while flamingos are present year-round, they are most abundant December through February.)

November 2–8, 2026
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From: \$6,750 per person



Your Journey Expert



Dr. Sarah Rugheimer (*Nov. 2026, Feb. 2027*) is an astrophysicist and astrobiologist at the University of Edinburgh. She works on how to detect life on an exoplanet by looking for atmospheric biosignatures. Her research interests include modelling the atmosphere and climate of extrasolar planets with a particular focus on atmospheric biosignatures in Earth-like planets, as well as modelling early Earth conditions. She earned her bachelor's degree in physics at the University of Calgary, and her MA and PhD at Harvard University in Astrophysics. She then took the Simons Origins of Life Research Fellowship to St. Andrews, followed by a Glasstone Research Fellowship at Oxford. In addition to research, Sarah is interested in public outreach. Her TED talk "The Search for Microscopic Aliens" has 1.8 million views on TED.com. She previously has been awarded the Barrie Jones Award and the BSA Rosalind Franklin Lectureship in 2019, as well as the Caroline Herschel Lectureship Prize in 2018. She previously produced an Audible Original titled Searching for Extraterrestrial Life. Her new Great Course, Experiencing James Webb: Invisible Galaxies Unveiled, is set to be released in March 2026.



Dr. Ed Murphy (*Nov. 2027*) is a Professor of Astronomy at the University of Virginia, where he also earned his PhD. In addition to his university teaching duties, Professor Murphy is particularly dedicated to public outreach and teaching the wonders of astronomy to adults and children alike. He was a postdoctoral fellow and an associate research scientist at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, where he worked on NASA's Far Ultraviolet Spectroscopic Explorer (FUSE). In 2000, he joined the faculty at the University of Virginia, where he used FUSE, along with radio telescopes, in his research on the interstellar medium. Professor Murphy was named a University of Virginia Office of Engagement Outstanding Faculty Speaker in 2012, and was awarded the University of Virginia Alumni Association Distinguished Professor Award in 2014. He has taught one Great Course: *Our Night Sky*.

Highlights

- Join your expert in exploring the otherworldly landscape of the Atacama Desert to glean insights into life on other planets.
- Visit the largest collection of telescopes of any public observatory in South America—in perfect darkness—when the stars are showing off their brightness and colors.
- Explore the lagoons, hot springs, mountains, and salt flats of the Atacama Desert, recognized by many as the best stargazing spot in the world.
- Catch a glimpse of the cosmos as you explore the moonlike landscape of dunes, rugged mountains, and distinctive rock formations of the Valley of the Moon, the testing grounds for the first prototype of the Mars rover.
- Immerse yourself in the colors of the Atacama, from the multihued mineral deposits in the Rainbow Valley to a flock of pink flamingos taking flight.
- Enjoy a wine tasting and lunch in Chile's Casablanca Valley.

Astronomer's Alley: Chile's Atacama Desert

Itinerary



Day 1: Santiago Sites

Arrive in Santiago and meet your Great Courses Journeys expert for a welcome talk. Then, begin your Chilean adventure with a half-day city tour showcasing Santiago's vibrant urban landscape set against the Andes. Visit the civic center, La Moneda Art Center, and stroll through Plaza de Armas. Explore the bohemian neighborhoods of Bellavista and Lastarria, then ascend San Cristóbal Hill for panoramic views. End the day in the upscale Las Condes and Vitacura districts, followed by a welcome dinner featuring Chilean cuisine and stunning skyline views.

Included Meals: Dinner

Accommodations: Pullman Vitacura

Day 2: Atacama Approach and Desert Moonscape

Fly to the Atacama Desert, a desert plateau nearly 8,000 feet above sea level. The Atacama is one of the driest places on Earth and a haven for stargazers. After lunch, explore the Valley of the Moon, a surreal landscape where NASA tested Mars rover prototypes. Return to the hotel for insights from your expert.

Enjoy an *apertif* as the sunset transforms the terrain, then enjoy dinner at the hotel. Later, join a local astronomer for a private stargazing session under one of the clearest skies on the planet, where the Milky Way and countless stars shine brilliantly.

Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Reception, Dinner

Accommodations: Cumbres Atacama Hotel

Day 3: Floating on the Flats

Begin with a visit to Toconao Village, a charming village known for its colonial architecture and stone craftsmanship. Continue to the vast Atacama salt flats, Chile's largest salt deposit and home to flamingos and other wildlife that gather



“What is unique about this trip is that we will be able to combine otherworldly night skies, astrobiology field sites, stunning geology, wildlife viewing, and good wine all in one week. I cannot think of a better way to spend my time than by chatting about astronomy and finding life on other planets with other curious and science-minded travelers.”

– Dr. Sarah Rugheimer



around shimmering lagoons. These surreal landscapes offer a glimpse into the region's unique ecology. After lunch, head to the Cejar Lagoon, where you can float effortlessly in its mineral-rich, hyper-saline waters while surrounded by breathtaking views of the desert and mountains.

Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Accommodations: Cumbres Atacama Hotel

Day 4: Geysers and Stargazing

Rise early for an excursion to view the Tatio Geysers, located near the Bolivian border, at sunrise. This geothermal field—the largest in the Southern Hemisphere—is alive with bubbling mud pools, steaming fumaroles, and hot springs. Learn about extremophiles—resilient organisms that thrive in harsh conditions—and offer clues to life on Mars. After lunch and a talk with your expert, enjoy free time at the hotel. In the evening, visit the SPACE Observatory for a guided stargazing session in perfect darkness. View nebulae and constellations through South America's largest public telescope park.

Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Accommodations: Cumbres Atacama Hotel

Day 5: Rock Art & Rainbow Ridges

Travel west to the Domeyko Mountains to explore Yeras Buenas, an open-air gallery of ancient petroglyphs etched by the Lican-Antay people, the desert's earliest inhabitants. Continue to the Rainbow Valley, named for its mineral-rich mountains, striped in shades of red, green, and yellow. End the afternoon with a visit to the remote village of Rio Grande, nestled among rivers and mountains and known for its adobe architecture and scenic location.

An optional two-hour horseback ride can be arranged for an additional cost through the Salt Mountain Range (Cordillera de la Sal) this afternoon.

Included Meals: Breakfast, Picnic Lunch, Dinner

Accommodations: Cumbres Atacama Hotel





Day 6: Atacama Approach and Desert Moonscape

Begin your final morning in the desert with a sunrise excursion to the Liwan Antay viewpoint, offering sweeping views of the salt mountains in early light. Then, transfer to the airport for a flight back to Santiago. Here, you can enjoy the afternoon and evening at leisure to explore the capital city on your own.

Included Meals: Breakfast, Boxed Lunch
Accommodations: Pullman Vitacura

Day 7: Toast Your Adventure

Depart Santiago for a scenic drive to Valparaíso, a UNESCO World Heritage port city known for its colorful hillside homes and poetic charm. En route, stop in Casablanca Valley for a wine tasting and a final lunch as a group. Explore Valparaíso's vibrant streets, historic funiculars, and panoramic harbor views. Then, transfer to the airport for your flight home.

Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch



Accommodations



The Pullman Santiago Vitacura

Santiago, Chile

The Pullman Santiago Vitacura is a stylish 5-star hotel located in Santiago's sought-out design district, known for its proximity to luxury shopping and fine dining. The hotel offers beautifully appointed and spacious rooms, an outdoor pool and fitness center, open terraces and elegant lounges, and stunning views of the Andes Mountains. **(2 nights)**



Cumbres Atacama Hotel

San Pedro de Atacama, Chile

Hotel Cumbres San Pedro de Atacama is a serene desert retreat nestled in Chile's High Andes at 2,500 meters above sea level, just minutes from the town center. Inspired by indigenous Atacameño architecture, the hotel features stone masonry, winding streams, and native gardens across its expansive 20-acre property. Guests enjoy access to a world-class spa with three pools, two heated outdoor pools, wet and dry saunas, and a fully equipped gym. Spacious rooms feature a private terrace and are decorated in soft desert tones and minimalist style, blending elegance with rustic charm. **(4 nights)**



Pricing:

Departure:	Double Occupancy:	Single Occupancy:	Deposit:	
November 2–8, 2026*	\$8,495	\$9,590	\$500	BOOK NOW
February 5–11, 2027*	\$8,495	\$9,590	\$650	BOOK NOW
November 28–December 4, 2027*	\$8,495	\$9,590	\$650	BOOK NOW

**Please note the internal round-trip airfare between Santiago--Atacama is not included in the tour price but will be arranged for the group. An estimated cost of \$695 will be added to the preliminary invoice at booking, and the final cost will be updated no later than 3 months before departure.*

What's Included:

- All accommodations for the duration of the tour
- Meals, as noted in the itinerary
- All sightseeing and visits as noted in each itinerary
- Expertise of The Great Courses Expert, travel director and local guides throughout the tour
- All gratuities for on-tour guides, drivers, hotel and restaurant staff as part of the group program
- All on-tour transportation, unless otherwise noted
- One group airport transfer upon departure
- Quietvox listening devices to facilitate audibility and social distancing on tour
- The assistance of an ATA professional travel team to assist with pre-trip questions, travel arrangements, including flights, extra hotel nights and other services
- Comprehensive pre-departure mailings and materials with information about the destination and what to expect on tour, including a suggested reading list
- Emergency evacuation insurance