Culture shock! A survival guide to customs and etiquette, Chile

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CultureShock!
A Survival Guide to Customs and Etiquette

Chile

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Editions
Chile, fertile and remarkable province, for its Antarctic region famous, by remote nations respected because of its strength and stature. Its people (Mapuche) are so gallant, so proud, brave and belligerent that no king or foreign power has ever ruled over them.”

—Alonso de Ercilla y Zúñiga, La Araucana

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

CHAPTER 1
WHAT WILL YOU FIND?

Chile is a country undergoing major changes. It is a developing country in every sense of the word. As such, it is a country that presents several different faces simultaneously. It is still a relatively poor country, with very traditional, conservative values. It is also a country enjoying its newfound wealth, eager to show off all that it has attained. It is a young country, with new and progressive ideas, pushing the nation forward. As it marches towards prosperity, Chilean society struggles with upholding its core values while at the same time striving to be modern. Therefore, the visitor's first impressions of Chile will most likely be contradictory and, at times, confusing. If you are prone to snap judgements about a country or its people, you may find yourself having to revise those opinions the longer you are here and the more Chileans you get to know.

It is also quite common to meet other foreigners who have a completely different opinion of the country from your own. We are all shaped by our previous experiences and personal values and this has an impact on how we view the rest of the world. The authors have met people who had never experienced a Third World country before. With knowledge only of wealthy countries, these people were shocked by the poverty they encountered in the poblaciones (poor neighbourhoods). Yet, other people we met, who had travelled to many poor countries, found Chile to be a very sophisticated and thriving nation. Thus, your first impression of the country may fall at one end of the spectrum or the other. Only with time and the spirit of adventure will you come to really know Chile and witness all the facets of its society.

SANTIAGO

Most visitors will enter Chile by flying into the capital city of Santiago. The Arturo Merino Benitez Airport—known as Pudahuel Airport for the area where it sits—is a shiny new structure that welcomes you to the city and the country. If it is a clear day, the mountains will grab your attention first. The Andes, the second highest mountain range in the world, are an imposing and impressive sight. As you near Santiago, most pilots will point out the Aconcagua peak, the highest mountain in the Americas at 6,962 metres (22,841 feet). If you are coming from the north, it will be out the left side of the airplane. If you arrive via Argentina, the last few moments of your flight will be the most interesting, because as soon as you have crossed the Andes, the plane must make a quick descent.

The new international terminal opened in 2002, providing the country with an efficient and comfortable airport. Today, almost all travellers need to venture into Santiago at some point, even if it is to just spend the night before continuing on to a cruise, other destinations throughout Chile or even to neighbouring countries. There is a hotel right at the airport for those who don’t want to go into the city. There are plans to further expand the airport as well.

First Arrival

You will notice that the Pudahuel Airport is located in a rural area outside of Santiago. When Susan first arrived in 1993, security did not have the same priority that it does today and the fences proved to be no barrier to the many dogs who lived alongside the airport. As her plane touched down, suddenly a group of excited dogs appeared running down the runway, barking madly and desperately chasing the airplane as if it were just another car.
The Santiago metropolitan area is home to over 5 million people and is experiencing rapid and continuous change. The true city centre is formed around La Moneda and the Plaza de la Constitución. Government offices, museums, the National Library, the Cathedral, the Plaza de Armas (main square) and the Municipal Theatre can all be found within blocks of each other. However, sparkling new skyscrapers have been built in the El Bosque area of Las Condes. Sometimes jokingly referred to as Sanhattan, this is the new business centre of Santiago. These highrises house banks and multinational corporations and the area is a flurry of activity.

The Santiago metropolitan area is made up of 32 municipalities (comunas), each with its own mayor and local government. Many expatriates live in the comunas of Vitacura, Las Condes or Lo Barnechea (which includes the popular La Dehesa neighbourhood). Other favourable neighbourhoods.
are Providencia, La Reina and Parque Forestal. Many comunas have experienced the same accelerated growth as the urban centres. You will find just about everything you need, large clean supermarkets, extensive shopping malls, mega cinemas and great restaurants.

With all of this growth, it’s obvious that the transportation system needed to change in order to keep pace. Infrastructure in Chile, especially Santiago, is very good. In addition to the new and improved highways, the Metro is adding new lines and extending old lines as quickly as it can. An old and inefficient bus system gave way to a new streamlined system.

### Changing with Time
Susan returns to Santiago every few years to live. Each time she goes back she is amazed at how much has changed over the course of just a couple of years and needs to reacquaint herself with the new Chile. As the number of new cars, big houses, fancy shops and exotic restaurants increases, she finds a change in attitudes as well. People seem increasingly more stressed, rushed and competitive, and at the same time, more willing to try new things and question what used to be the norm. One example is swearing and nudity on primetime network television.

### VINA DEL MAR AND VALPARAISO
Thanks to its extremely long coastline, no trip to Chile would be complete without a detour to the magnificent Pacific coast. Many beach communities are a quick drive from Santiago. The twin cities of Viña del Mar and Valparaiso, which constitute the second largest metropolitan area after the capital, are a must see. Viña, heavily reliant on tourism, and Valparaiso, a picturesque major port, lie about 120 km (72 miles) northwest of Santiago.

**Viña del Mar**
Viña del Mar, once a private hacienda, began as a tourist resort for Santiaguinos and the nearby residents of Valparaiso. Viña offers beautiful beaches and ample hotels or apartments for weekend trips or longer summertime vacations. Much of the growth in the ‘Garden City’ is quite recent, as new high-rise apartment buildings have sprung up throughout the city to cater to the growing number of people escaping Santiago. The infrastructure is well suited to handle tourism and there is a casino and many restaurants, shopping areas and discos. There are also theatres, art galleries, libraries and the main strip in downtown Viña comes alive at night with locals, Santiaguinos, tourists, street performers and artisans.

**Valparaiso**
Valparaíso, one of the country’s principal ports, houses Chile’s naval headquarters and the seat of Congress. In the early 19th century, with the rise of world trade, Valparaiso was a re-supply station for ships coming from Europe and the eastern United States. Goods unloaded here were reshipped to other ports in the Pacific and Oceania. During this time many British, French and Germans settled in Valparaiso. The British came not only to work in the trade industry, but also as technical advisers to the Chilean navy. A strong British influence can still be felt today.

Once the financial and commercial centre of Chile, the city later experienced a decline. In an attempt at a revival,

The city of Valparaíso, known for its hills and escenarios, is registered on the UNESCO World Heritage List.
the military government relocated Congress to Valparaiso in the mid-1980s, but the move did not have the desired effect. Santiaguinos have not been enticed to relocate or establish businesses here, and, in fact, Congressmen maintain homes in Viña and/or return to Santiago daily.

This does not mean, however, that the city is dull. Quite the contrary, Valparaiso has a great deal of character and shows an interesting side of Chile. Although the Chilean film industry produces only a handful of movies each year, the majority are filmed here because of its beauty, mystery and charm. Funiculars, called ascensores, are located throughout the city, carrying people to and from their homes high on the hills. A ride up any funicular will treat you to spectacular views, both during the day and evening. Pablo Neruda had a home here, overlooking the city and the ocean. Now a museum, it is filled with fascinating artifacts. On Sundays, a huge market, selling everything from fruits and vegetables, to furniture and baby chicks, enlivens the city. The nightlife includes numerous pubs, discos and restaurants. Chile’s best technical university, Santa Maria University, is also located here.

There is also a seedy side to the city, due in part to the fact that it is a port of call for many sailors. Prostitution is widespread and crime is a serious problem in Valparaíso. If you wander about the city be careful to stay in populated and well-lit areas and beware of pickpockets.

THE NORTH

Although most expatriates will find themselves living in Santiago, a few will wind up in other parts of the country. Many of those who work in the mining and shipping industries will undoubtedly travel north, whether it is to live or just for a business meeting. For others living in Santiago, the North is a great travel destination if you’re adventurous and enjoy the desert.

Arica

Arica, known as the ‘City of Eternal Spring’, is an important shipping port for southern Peru and Bolivia. This city took off in the 1950s, but growth declined in the 1970s. Currently the city depends upon international trade, fishing and tourism, and is a major supplier of fishmeal, used for animal feed.

Iquique

Iquique, once the centre of the saltpeter (nitrate) industry, is now famous for its Duty Free Zone (ZOFRI), serving Chile and bordering countries. Within ZOFRI goods are exempt from import duties and value added tax (IVA) as long as purchases are clearly for personal consumption.

Iquique is Chile’s main fishing port. Most of the catch is used to produce fish oil and fishmeal. Other important industries are manufacturing, agriculture and mining. Unfortunately, crime in this port city is a serious issue.
Antofagasta

Antofagasta is Chile’s fourth largest city and is heavily reliant upon the mining industry. In fact, mining accounts for half of the gross regional product. It is the major city of the north and one of Chile’s most important shipping ports. Chuquicamata (Chile’s largest copper mine), other large copper mines (such as La Escondida), and salt, lithium, borax and phosphorus mines are located in the area. Although it is an industrial town, the city also draws a good number of tourists. There are some good beaches here and it is the stepping off point for forays into the Atacama Desert, the driest desert in the world, and nearby tourist sites.

La Serena

A beautiful city noted for its architecture, La Serena has been rated the number one city in Chile. The second oldest city in the country, it grew exponentially during the mining boom, fueled primarily by the silver and copper industries. More recently, however, agriculture (mainly fruit), scientific activity, mining and tourism have been responsible for the city’s economic growth. It is a vibrant city with a long beautiful beach and a number of restaurants, museums, theatres, art galleries, libraries and bookstores. Every year the city celebrates the Festival de Cine Mudo (silent movies) and the Festival de La Serena (music).

Nearly one third of this region’s population is involved in agriculture. Fruit, vineyards and new agro-industries dominate this region’s economy. Most Chilean pisco (a distilled alcohol made from white grapes) comes from this area, specifically the Elqui Valley.

The skies in this part of the country are among the clearest and driest in the world. This has made this zone the main astronomical observation center in the Southern Hemisphere, internationally known for its highly sophisticated observatories. Cerro Tololo Inter-American Observatory is run by the National Optical Astronomical Observatory, an association of American universities and the Universidad de Chile. La Silla Observatory is administered by the European Southern Observatory, run by seven European countries. Las Campanas Observatory is operated by the Carnegie Institute in Washington, DC, USA.

THE SOUTH

For travellers who immediately head south for cruises or for adventure tourism, the first impressions of Chile will be of lush forests, snow capped volcanoes, vast national parks and ancient glaciers. For those living in Santiago you cannot say you have been to Chile until you have visited the south. Those involved in the forestry or fishing industries will most likely wind up in the southern part of the country at some point.

Concepción

Founded in 1550, Concepción was destroyed by two earthquakes and tsunamis in 1730 and 1751. The city was rebuilt in 1754 at its present location. The University of Concepción is well known and highly respected throughout the country. It is the only true university campus in Chile. There are also five other universities located here.

The area surrounding Concepción is an agricultural and industrial centre. Wheat, wine and coal are produced here and the forestry industry also plays a very important role. In the late 19th century the forests in this area were clear-cut in order to grow wheat to feed workers. Unfortunately, this led to
land erosion. Reforestation projects have been implemented using Radiata pine. About 65 per cent of the country’s pine plantations are located in this region.

The Lota coal mine, once the largest in Chile, was located just south of Concepción. Coal mining began in 1852 and the money losing mine was finally closed down in 1997 amidst major protests. This is undoubtedly one of the poorest regions of Chile and it was hit hard when many people lost their jobs in the mine, in spite of retraining programmes.

From Concepción southwards, the temperature gradually decreases and rainfall levels increase. There is heavy rainfall during the winter months. Nearby is the Bio-Bio River famous for its grade five rapids. A series of dams was built to generate power so parts of the river are no longer accessible to white-water rafting.

**Temuco**

Temuco began as a fortress designed to defend early settlers from attacks by the Mapuche. Today, Temuco is the fastest growing city in Chile. The boom is centred around the agricultural and forestry industries. The area surrounding Temuco is home to many of the indigenous people of Chile. This region is referred to as La Frontera, the Frontier, because for so many years the Mapuche were able to repel numerous advances and resist domination. Even though Temuco is experiencing high levels of growth, the native people remain impoverished.

The Mapuche sell their wares at the craft and produce market in the centre of Temuco. The city’s museum and university are both well respected and a drive into rural areas offers views of traditional Mapuche houses and lovely scenery. Temuco is also proud of its favourite son, Pablo Neruda, who incorporated this beautiful landscape and the perennial rainfall into many of his early poems.

**Valdivia**

Although the government did not offer free land to homestead in this part of Chile, many Germans still migrated to Valdivia. Using their own capital, the German population invested in industry and farming, and at the turn of the century Valdivia was Chile’s leading industrial city. Today, many of the farms have become highly mechanised, producing a variety of crops. The dairy and forestry industries also play a major role in the economy. The city receives many tourists who come to explore the nearby 17th century Spanish forts. Valdivia is also home to the respected Universidad Austral. Located on it campus is a serene botanical garden and arboretum where locals go to take a relaxing stroll.

**Puerto Montt and Puerto Varas**

The Chilean government, frustrated in its attempts to colonise the southern part of the country and bring the Mapuche under control, initiated a programme to actively recruit German settlers. In 1852, the first 212 German settlers arrived at Puerto Montt. They initially inhabited the shores of Lake Llanquihue, transforming the area by clearing the dense temperate rainforest. Each German settler received 75 blocks of land (each slightly larger than a hectare) plus 12 blocks for each child. The families received free lodging until the land was handed over, a pair of oxen, one cow and calf, and boards and nails to build a house. They also received a monthly allowance for one year, free medical care, a certificate of ownership and Chilean citizenship, if they desired. The government ended the programme in 1880.

Today Puerto Montt and Puerto Varas, combined with the city of Osorno, constitute Chile’s fourth largest industrial center, with an economy based primarily on agriculture, including livestock, grains, potatoes, a variety of berries and asparagus. Most of the milk consumed in Chile comes from here. There are more than 30 salmon farms in the area. The Lake District, as this region is known, is a major destination for national and international tourists.

The small fishing cove of Angelmó, part of the city of Puerto Montt, is famous for its seafood market. Puerto Montt is also the main port for boats travelling south. In addition to freighters transporting cargo, a number of cruises to the Laguna San Rafael and various small towns and hot springs originate here.
Chiloe
Just South of Puerto Montt lies the archipelago of Chiloe. The green rolling hills and many inlets and coves of the Isla Grande de Chiloe were the last bastion of the Spanish empire in Chile. The island has a rich mythology, which includes wizards, spirits, monsters and ghost ships. Chiloe’s unique architecture boasts beautiful old wooden churches and houses built on stilts over the water.

Punta Arenas
The most important city on the southern tip of the country, Punta Arenas, lies on the Strait of Magellan. In fact, this was the first part of Chile seen by Europeans. Punta Arenas is located in Chilean Patagonia and as such has lured adventurers and mavericks. The earliest settlers of Punta Arenas were tempted by the rumours of vast gold deposits in the area. To their dismay, the rumours proved to be false. The area then turned to sheep farming and wool production. Subsequent arrivals came because of the thriving shipping industry. Before the Panama Canal was built, all ships en route from Europe and the eastern United States had to sail round the tip of South America to get to the Pacific Coast. Later migrants came to eek out a living working on the oil wells. Although people arrived from all over, a great many people in Punta Arenas are of Croatian origin. The current economy is based on cattle, mining and fishing.

As the ‘capital’ of Chilean Patagonia, many tourists pass through Punta Arenas on their way to the Torres del Paine National Park, the cave of the Milodón and the penguin colony at Otway Inlet. Punta Arenas is also the gateway to Tierra del Fuego and the Chilean Antarctic Territory.

Relations between southern Chile and southern Argentina are rich and diverse due to cross-border traffic of goods and people. Although the two countries have had border disputes, many Patagonians are more closely connected to each other than to their fellow citizens in Santiago or Buenos Aires.

We will show that a nation can become prosperous without losing its soul, that it can generate wealth without contaminating the air we breathe or the water we drink, that it can foster progress and entrepreneurship while simultaneously helping those who remain behind, that we can build a country where everyone belongs, women and men, from the capital city and the regions.

—Michelle Bachelet, President of Chile, victory speech, January 2006