

Traveldiary Brigitte & Heinz

Chile: a modern bustling country with a multifaceted desert



Chapter 31

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So far, South-America had been a blank spot on our travel-map. Thanks to our South-Pacific trip, we came close to the Latin American coast and our airline ticket to Tahiti and the Easter-Island offered us the unexpected possibility to include a side-trip to Santiago de Chile for free. Sure enough, we couldn't resist to get at least a taste of how Chile "proper" looks like. Geographically, the Easter Island, we've visited before, belongs to Polynesia, and only politically to Chile, so it had offered only a foretaste of South America.

Chile consists of a long, narrow strip of land between the Andes to the east and the Pacific Ocean to the west. The country includes also the Pacific Islands of Juan Fernández, Salas y Gómez, Desventuradas and Isla de Pascua or Easter Island respectively (which we've described in our South-Pacific story). Furthermore, Chile claims 1,250,000 km² of Antarctica.

Chile's ~18 million inhabitants spread over a landmass of 756,096 km². Spain conquered and colonized most of Chile in the mid of the 16th century. The country declared independence in 1818, and emerged soon thereafter as a relatively stable authoritarian republic. A period of war followed (war of the Pacific) with land gains from Peru and Bolivia. Thereafter, there were decades of left-right polarization and turmoil. This cumulated in a coup d'état, installing a right-wing dictatorship lead by Augusto Pinochet. After 16 years it ended 1990, after a lost referendum, to be succeeded by a centre left coalition.

Nowadays, Chile is one of South-Americas most stable and prosperous countries. It leads Latin-America in many aspects, like income per capita, state of peace, economic freedom and low perception of corruption.



Santiago de Chile: a pleasant and diverse capital

Coming from the Easter Island, we landed in Santiago de Chile late on November 30th 2017. We didn't expect much from the capital, but it prove to be a pleasant surprise. Despite Chile being independent for 200 years, Santiago felt almost Mediterranean to us, as many things reminded us of Spain. Apart from many nice buildings and other sights, it was the Latin American vibe that opened our hearts to this city. We liked the wide roads and pretty parks with musicians performing and attractions for children. Only minutes away, there are bustling pedestrian areas, lined with simple shops and sophisticated shopping centres. Of course, there are lots of restaurants, and uncountable cafés and "pastelerías" (cake shops) selling Tortas and Kuchen, a legacy of the many German immigrants.



After our long time in the South Pacific, where the choice of drinks was often restricted to water, sprite and coke, we enjoyed it even more that fresh fruit and freshly squeezed fruit juices and smoothies abound. Furthermore, we felt that things got a fair bit cheaper – in contrast to tourists arriving from other South American destinations. Chile figures, together with Argentina and Brazil, among South America’s most expensive countries.

just a little bit more, plates get creative and refined. We were pleased (Heinz even extremely pleased...) that our Pacific favourite, raw-fish-salad, was still on the menu. Here it’s called “ceviche”, enhanced with cilantro (coriander) and considered a Peruvian speciality. We soon discovered that Peruvian cuisine seems to have a good reputation here, probably thanks to the many immigrants. However, in this city of more than 7 million inhabitants, it is easy to find food from all over the world.

Also food was a big surprise. Budget meals are simple, cheap and filling, but if you pay

Going for dinner at 9 PM, we thought, we adapted to the Latin American rhythm. At this time, even at the most popular places, we always found a table. After 10:30 PM, the locals flocked in in masses, and when we left at 11:30 PM, the restaurants were full to the rim – even al fresco dining areas on chilly evenings. In Chile, life doesn’t come to a halt until the early morning hours, not even on children’s playgrounds.

On Saturday, after 3 PM and on almost deserted. Then, people shopping to the big malls on Costanera. We used the modern north-eastern part everything was open and many architectural façades. All are dominated Gran Torre Santiago, towering complex.



Sundays, Santiago’s city centre is head for leisure activities or the outskirts, like Centro weekend to explore the of the city where bustling. This area boasts marvels with glass by South America’s tallest only in 2015; the 300m high above the Centro Costanera

For the way back to our lodging, we chose the scenic walking paths through “Parque Metropolitano de Santiago”. Despite various cable cars commuting between the park’s several hills and the town below, the roads in the hills were well used by locals hiking and cycling. Along the way, we enjoyed great views down to the widespread city, and also to the nearby Andes. Snow had already melted on the peaks, but during winter, the people of Santiago can reach several ski fields within one hour.

As many South American cities, Santiago has a giant statue of Virgin Mary. Here, she towers atop Cerro San Cristobal. However, the souvenir stalls, snack-bars and restaurants below, received more visitors.

Though, we’ve felt safe during our stage in Chile, we observed that almost all houses, apartment-blocs and business yards in Santiago, are secured with barbed wires or fences with spiky ends. The gap between poor and rich was also obvious, seeing how many people try making ends meet by offering windscreen-wash, selling drinks or performing feats on traffic lights.



San Pedro de Atacama: a dusty tourist hub



A Latam flight on December 5th 2017, brought us in two hours to Calama, from where an airport shuttle whistled us in 1½ hours to San Pedro de Atacama. This small desert village consists of only low adobe houses, which often also have their back-yard enclosed with such a mud-brick wall. In the last decades, San Pedro mutated from a farming settlement to a tourist base, attracting visitors who arrive in ever greater numbers to see the marvels of the surrounding Atacama Desert. As its neighbouring villages, San Pedro de Atacama developed within a small stream fed oasis. The village is situated in the very north of Chile on more than 2,400m altitude. It enjoys an extremely dry and sunny climate with summer days up to 40°C, and some cold winter nights well below frozen (till -15°C). Be it summer or winter, there's always a big difference in temperature between day and night.

At San Pedro de Atacama, you don't have to go far to see the desert; you find it right in the town centre. To preserve the desert character, the municipality decided to leave the main tourist road unsealed. It consists only of compressed sand and dirt. If the cars and tourist buses pass, or the wind blows hard, pedestrians, souvenir shops and eateries get totally covered in dust. We're not sure whether most tourists love sand-crumbed ice cream, dusty dining tables and dusty souvenirs. However, the local councillors think, a sandstorm in the main shopping road enhances the desert experience of visitors!



The dusty main-tourist roads of San Pedro de Atacama are flanked with more than 50 tour-agencies, countless restaurants, souvenir-shops, corner shops, bike-rentals, cafés, “pastelerías” and ice-cream parlours. Meal prices in restaurants are rather high for Chile, but so is the quality in many eateries. Cheap meals are cheap, but those willing to pay a bit more, can eat quite well. At most places, a sandwich or burger costs more than a proper three-course meal. Again, freshly made fruit juices prove very popular. We observed that most Chileans have one with every meal.



At certain times of the day, the roads of San Pedro are packed with tourists looking for restaurants. On long week-ends, there is such a pilgrimage of additional visitors, it's almost impossible to tumble over. As most come from Chile and other South American countries, we really felt that we're in Latin America and not in a tourist ghetto for oversea tourists.



Many guests come for only 3 – 6 days and have already pre-booked 1 – 2 tours for every day. They hardly consider that the high altitude could have a bad impact on their bodies, as some of the top highlights are located more than 4,500m above sea level. However, it's easy to arrange tours locally. With so many agencies competing, we often got a very good discount. Many tour operators have modern mini-buses, so you travel in comfort to the scenic sites that may be hours away from San Pedro. On most excursions we booked, we were only 3 to 10 people, on a shorter one 26. Even if you get to a place in a small group, it doesn't mean you'll be almost by yourselves. To us it is a mystery, why all buses leave at exactly the same time, to exactly the same places. Upon returning from a nearby attraction, which had very few visitors during our do-it-yourself bicycle tour, we counted 36 buses on the 5km stretch from the entrance to the village; all heading here for sunset.

In fact, there are a few sights near San Pedro that can be visited afoot or by bicycle. But we admit, we have underestimated the impact of the high altitude in combination with the thin air. It doesn't need lots of exercise and you'll be panting and gasping for breath.

The Atacama Desert: a varied, awe inspiring landscape



The main attraction of San Pedro is its location in the middle of the amazing Atacama Desert. But the actual size of this wilderness is much bigger and even more varied still, than “only” in the Andean surroundings of this nice little village.

The Atacama Desert is regarded as coastal desert because (and despite) its location from the sea to the volcano Ojos del Salado on 6'893m. It stretches over ~1,200km along South Americas central west coast, from the north of Chile to the south of Peru. From west to east, three zones are identified; the Chilean Coastal Range (cordillera de la costa), the Middle Valley and the Andes. Acting as “two-sided rain shadow”, the two ranges prevent moisture from coming to the interior. The areas we've visited, were just as the biggest part of this desert, above 2,400m of altitude. San Pedro de Atacama lies 200km inland and is, apart from the polar regions, the world's driest regions. During our fortnight, humidity reached normally only 4% during daytime, and around 20% during the night. Therefore, our skin, lips, nose and eyes got quickly dry. On the other hand, the risk of bad weather is virtually nil.

Most of the Atacama Desert is composed of stony terrain, volcanoes, salt lakes (salares), sand (+dunes), and felsic lava. It was Brigitte's dream to see this region for herself and it was still way more impressive than imagined.

A little south of San Pedro, lies the 3,000km² big, fascinating salt lake Salar de Atacama, of which we visited several sections on several tours. This giant saltpan isn't all white, as the wide fringe is mixed with earth and desert dust. Nevertheless, it is an impressive sight though even in clear weather, you won't get its entire size from any one point on the ground. Our first bus excursion led to the "Lagos escondidas de Baltinache", a series of pretty open water holes on the salt flat. There are 7 ponds with water colours from pastel blue to turquoise green. Around them, the surrounding salt appears totally white. You see quite clearly into the ponds, of which the ground disappears in the depth of a tunnel-system linking all water holes and ponds in the lower part of the mineral rich composition.



To make tourists even happier, two of these ponds are open for bathing. With 33% salinity, you float just as in the Dead Sea. The funniest part of this was the following shower at the building, where the entrance fee was due. There, people can wash off their white crust after bathing. We witnessed a long queue and heard that "water is coming soon"...



To our big surprise, a lorry with a water-tank was really arriving 5 minutes later. Now it only took a good while until the water was pumped up to the tank on the roof.

In the mountain ranges near San Pedro, you often see salt crystals that have made their way up to the surface. Hence, especially the "Cordillera de la sal" (Salt Range) looks as if a little snow would overly the top. We explored this range, as well as the "Valle de la muerte" or Valley of death, ourselves by hiking, and marvelled at the reddish rock-formations and -strata that had all kinds of shapes. Sometimes, the terrain consists more of earth than rock and unexpectedly to us, there were sometimes sand dunes between the mountains. Tour operators make good money by selling sand-boarding excursions.

Another impressive landscape we visited by ourselves, was the "Valle de la Luna" (Valley of the moon), where we went by bicycle. This is another area with a multitude of beautiful rock-formations and dunes. The view from the highest sand dune was awesome, as were the rock caverns, and narrow foot paths between two serpentine rock faces. Some were almost entirely covered in salt crystals, resembling the bizarre shapes you see during winter on ice-covered rocks. Just the sizzling hot temperatures told a different story. At the Atacama Desert's most scenic sections, an entrance fee is due, but in return, good tracks, toilets and a few shade-shelters are provided.



Vicuñas, cacti and salt-lakes: it's all in the desert

By asking a bit around, we heard that this region has a few areas where big cacti are growing. Finally, we found an agency that provided a tour to see them. Together with only a guide and a French lady, we were hiking along a tiny rivulet

of which both shores abounded with Giant Cardon cactuses (*Echinopsis atacamensis*). The oldest specimens are many decades, often centuries old. At first, only a pillar grows, but after a while some 5 - 10 arms may sprout. The plant can reach 8m in height. But there are also other cactus species growing, like e.g. the small "Cojín de la Suegra"



that translates to pillow of the mother in law... Every now and then, we would see a flower on top of those spiky columns, enhancing the appearance of those wonderful cactuses even more.

On day 8 we felt ready to be whistled to even higher altitudes and had booked the "Piedras Rojas Tour". It brought us up to 4,400m and turned out to be the highlight of our stage in the Atacama Desert. It was a day trip with 8 other visitors, predominantly from Latin America. The Minibus made a great number of worthwhile stops, and we would have seen opportunities for many more... At first, we were shown lagoon Chaxa, in the southern part of the saltpan Salar de Atacama. Here, we were lucky to see quite a number of flamingos feeding on the minuscule Brine shrimp, abounding in the salty water.

Later, we got to two blue lakes Miscanti and Miñiques that are beautifully framed by volcanoes of 5,600m altitude. We observed different water birds, but also some Vicuñas, a lama-like animal walking along the opposite shore.

Driving another hour eastwards, we reached the most impressive area of this tour; the Salar de Aguas Calientes 3 (No's 1-4 are far apart). The thin layer of water that covers part of this large salt lake, has a bright greenish colour. The landscape framing it, cries out for attention in all directions. For most parts, it is dominated by volcanic cones of different colours, contrasting beautifully with the white and green salt plain. In another direction, the framing hills form a brown and green backdrop. On a section of the shore, there are some red sandstones, the so-called "Piedras Rojas" though a saltcrust had coated them in white. Despite the rocks having given the tour the name, the real highlight were not those rocks, but the landscape surrounding them. It was the most incredible, most beautiful place to be, and even though we didn't have any problem with high-altitude sickness, it left us breathless!



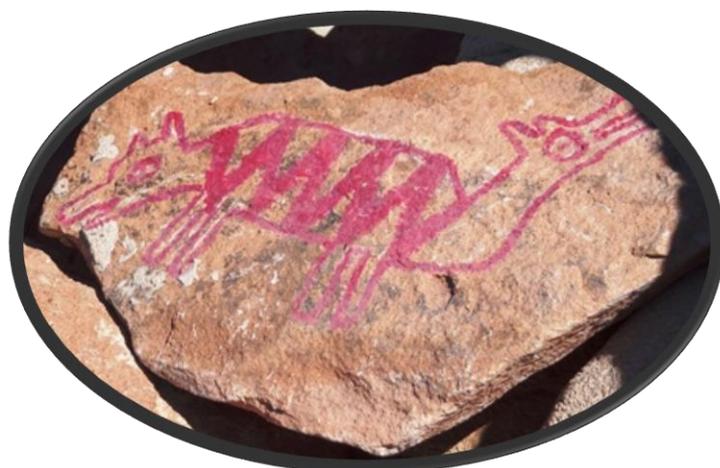
We also visited the villages of Socaire and Toconao. Their small adobe- and stone houses guard over irrigated, terraced fields below them. Before the sun set, our lot of select, happy and content tourists were driven back.

Pictures of a colourful mountain that were certainly photo-shopped, motivated us never the less, to book the “Arco Iris Tour” the day after. It was only a morning-tour and led yet in another direction out of San Pedro de Atacama than we had travelled before.



The visited site, named Yervas Buenas, was near the (presently tiny) Rio Grande. Its wide stony riverbed was really green and even trees were growing. Here, we saw lamas, as well as small herds of wild donkeys. Our 3-people tourist group was led to the ticket-cottage and then around a beautiful area of large eroded sandstones in curious shapes. The most talented members of atavistic ancestors of our still not very highly developed mankind, had passed their time rock-carving this soft stone. These petroglyphs depict mostly recognizable animals and people, though a few figures remain mysterious.

Further on in the valley, we got to the area named Arco Iris, for its rainbow colours in the rocks. Well, of course it's not like a rainbow, but with a succession of different minerals shining in totally varying shades of green, browns, red, white and ochre, still very colourful. In front of this marvellous range, a solitary group of brown spines composed of earth only, towered beautifully in the morning light.



Seeing the varied colours of the Atacama Desert, be it on rock layers, dry salt pans, volcanoes or the water surface of the salt lakes, was a real highlight. We still remember what Teresa, our former flat mate, shouted out, after joining us the first time to a nudist beach: “Now I have seen everything, now I can die”. Brigitte said exactly that, after marvelling at the wonders of the Atacama Desert.

Farewell from Chile: short insight - pleasant surprise

Our three weeks on Chile's mainland, as well as our stage on Easter Island (part of our South-Pacific story), were the culmination of this years' travelling. With Chile, we've discovered a modern South American country, with a very European appeal. After five months on remote, lonely Pacific Islands, the bustling town of Santiago de Chile, and the no less bustling tourist-village of San Pedro de Atacama, with their Latin-American vibe, were just what we needed. Apart from taking a bath in the crowd, we were rewarded with the Atacama Desert, one of the world's most awe inspiring and unique landscapes.

After two weeks among the marvels of the Atacama, we've returned for another two days to Santiago, before boarding a plane that brought us in 13 hours to New Zealand...



Brigitte & Heinz



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