

A Taste of Chile



The streets of Santiago



La Joya Vineyard

From fabulous wines to skiing the Andes, often overlooked Chile may surprise you.

Happiness. It comes to us in many different ways. In order to achieve as much happiness as possible in life, I have always been a firm believer that one needs to make his or her own happiness happen. I have learned that for me, one sure route to happiness has been the excitement of discovery that traveling offers and I have worked hard to be able to continually expand my horizons.

While we took family vacations when I was as child, they were never to exotic, faraway places. I never experienced the foreign exchange programs offered in school or a year abroad before college. I did however fantasize what it would be like to have the opportunity to live in another land, folding into another way of life for a period of time. Even at a very young age I knew that someday seeing the world would ultimately be my goal.

It is exciting to find myself at a point in life when that fantasy has become reality. Working in the demanding publishing industry, raising a child and trying to maintain precious relationships in my life held my travel desires at bay for the past 16 years. Now, having the luxury of an overseeing role in my company and parenting an increasingly independent pre-teen, I have been able to set my goal to travel into high gear.

Once I had my daughter Breanna's camp schedule in place for the summer, I decided this was the time to put together a last minute trip for my own summer vacation. My desire was to pick a place that was exotic; out of the norm; a destination that most Minnesotan's wouldn't dream of traveling to in the hot summer month of July.

One of my passions in life (one that my daughter and I share) is the sport of skiing. Snow or water; take your pick! The thrill of speed, coupled with the art and finesse of balance has always been a great challenge for me whether I was at camp

as a child or skiing the ever-so-mediocre hills of America's Dairyland. It was just as I finished helping Breanna pack for her one month overnight camp in her mom's home state of Wisconsin that it dawned on me – the perfect unique destination – skiing the mountains in Chile.

Yes, an adventure to Chile was exactly what this travel reporter from Minnesota needed. So, while Breanna was safe and sound skiing on the water at her summer camp, her mom was about to be on snow skis at the Andes Mountains south of the equator! Of course, leaving at the height of our heat wave meant flying into the core of this beautiful country's cold season and, ironically I ended up taking off on one of the hottest days in recent Minnesota history.

I had mapped out an itinerary that would give me a chance to experience several different regions in Chile over the course of eight days, with skiing as the last leg of the trip.

Flying at night to a faraway place is my recommendation to all. You board in the early evening, watch a movie to make you sleepy and then try your hardest to get some z's throughout the night flight. Waking up in another country is absolutely amazing to me. Minus the stiff neck and rubbery legs, the flight was truly a breeze. Much to my surprise there is only a 1-hour time difference from Minnesota to Santiago Chile. The sun was up and the day was just beginning for the locals on the July Monday that I arrived.

After checking into the Hotel Plaza San Francisco, an absolutely stunning 5-star hotel located in the heart of the city, I hit the pavement with passion. The city of Santiago is the largest city in Chile with an estimated population just shy of 5 million. For two straight days I immersed myself in the city's culture.

From the minute the sun is up there are street vendors for miles in every direction, a fish market that you could spend hours in just admiring the daily catches, hiking and biking options that make the day fly by. There is no question that to see Santiago is to hoof it on foot. There is no reason to plan your day, let it unfold naturally. The elegant colonial architecture and bustling street performers give this capital city a true cosmopolitan feel. Go with your instinct when it comes to roaming. By simply following an influx of people flowing into one of the local museums, I stumbled upon the traveling Rodin exhibit! What an unexpected thrill it was to see "The Thinker" at the Museo Nacional de Bella Artes.

The only drawback to this region, I would say, is the language barrier. There would be long stretches of time before I would encounter anyone that spoke even broken English. I turned that handicap almost into a game. These proud people are eager to help and at least try to figure out your needs. If you can't get your point across it simply wasn't important enough. The hint here is to carry a small dictionary in your hip pocket.

A deep connection to the Roman Catholic Church makes the spirit of this city unusually strong and while Santiago may be big, it has an almost provincial aura to it. One of the key day destinations to experience is a hike, bike or train ride up to the statue of the Virgin, Cerro San Cristobal. In 1987 Pope John Paul II visited this site in his bulletproof "Pope-mobile" to bless the city. Blessed would be an accurate word for the happiness I sensed with the people. Whether it is their gelato fascination or the romantic parks that are packed with kissing couples, this city makes you smile!

Two of my most memorable meals were in the first 48 hours of being below the equator. Los Balcones de Lima was a quaint little restaurant with only 7 tables that I luckily fell into off the beaten track. Serving up perfectly prepared Peruvian food and THE BEST Pisco Sour I encountered on the entire trip. (I had my share of these sweet drinks served in lovely champagne flutes.) This unusual refreshing drink is Chile's signature libation.



Skiing the Andes

My second favorite meal was within the fish market in the center of the town square. There are endless cafes to sit at and enjoy the most amazing fish preparations you have ever dreamed of sinking your teeth into. Lunch is late in Chile. No one seems to be seated until almost 2 pm. Dinner is also a late start time, usually around 9 pm. No worries on that however, Santiago never seems to sleep. There are massive amounts of people of all ages throughout the night roaming the energized streets.

I was not ready to leave Santiago after only two days, however there is so much to see in Chile that you need to clip along if you are going to experience the different regions and the very different flavors the other cities and the countryside have to offer.

My third day was spent roaming the spectacular wine country. The area has over 90 miles of beautiful farmland tucked in between two mountain ranges. Even though I was traveling through on the off-season, there was still a nice selection of wineries open to the public. The Hotel Santa Cruz Plaza in the Colchagua Valley is the place to rest your head after a day of wine sampling. It is an elegant and quaint hotel nestled in the town of Santa Cruz.

The Chilean wine makers boast some of the best wines due to the excellent climate to grow their grapes. The long Central Valley, with its perfect soil, hot sunny days and cool nights and ideal temperate climate is the key. My favorite wineries among those I visited, were La Joya and Vina MontGras. Unlike American wine-tastings, these pours were large! That may be why I purchased 4 bottles and forgot that I would have to cart them along on the long plane ride home. No regrets however on that decision!

Leaving the wine country, just like leaving Santiago, was difficult. Several days could be spent in this region taking your time and revisiting the different wineries. The Vendimia, or harvest takes

place between early March and mid April, so if your trip is specifically to tour the countryside, go during their peak season when everything is green and in full swing. I enjoyed being there however during the slow time. The service and personal attention was outstanding...not to mention those hefty pours!

The next destination in Chile was spent in Valparaiso and Vina del Mar. These two cities sit side-by-side on Chile's Pacific coast. The flavor of the two towns is completely different. Valparaiso was Santiago's thriving port for centuries. It was one of the first Chilean cities founded by the Spanish in 1541. The hills are steep and the roads are winding and old in this rustic working class city. Many of their buildings, built by the British, are dating back to the 19th century.

Vina del Mar, where the tourists flock, is where my day and evening were spent. Like Santiago, the best way to see this city is on foot. The boardwalk is the place to be. Once again the street vendors seem to rule the area. Artists and tourists swarm this lively section of town hugging the sea. Even on the off-season when the weather is brisk there were families having picnics on the beach.

The last stop on my eight day adventure was the pinnacle of my trip – literally and figuratively. Having the chance to ski in the Andes Mountains was a dream come true. 12,000 feet up in the Andes there is a triangle of ski resorts that sparkle beneath the Chilean sun. La Parva, Valle Nevado and El Colorado/Farellones. This is the biggest playground for skiers and snowboarders in South America, with over 60 miles of prepared trails and over 40 lifts between them.

Unlike many American ski resorts this area is open and vast with very few trees or trails. The layout is an abundance of mass open terrain that can suit any level. When a 2-year old little girl whizzed by my ski boots, I knew the area was truly for all family members! The children's programs seem to be quite extensive with

group and private lessons available upon request. The view from the tiptop of the mountains will forever be etched in my mind. My two-night stay was at the cozy El Colorado Apart Hotel. The staff could not have been nicer. They are hard, dedicated workers and truly bend over backwards for each and every guest.

Topping off this adventurous trip with skiing in the Andes was the perfect icing on the cake. Happiness to me really *is* traveling to places that no one else might think to venture to. And the wonderful thing about traveling is that it is all just a plane ride away. I felt so invigorated being *chilly* in Chile skiing one day and playing tennis in the sweltering heat in Minnesota the next day.

My goal was accomplished. I had the wonderful opportunity to snow ski in the summertime while my daughter water-skied at summer camp. As she so eloquently stated in the letter that was waiting for me upon my return, that she skied "around the lake 3 separate times and of those 3 times, I only fell once! How awesome is that!!!"

My response to her letter; "Pretty awesome Breanna! Your mom fell 2x's in 2 days on black diamond runs in the Andes ... how awesome is that my darling daughter!"

The hardest part of being home from such a memorable trip is having to wait until my little camper gets back from her summer adventure to share all the details. Her tales will most likely top my trip below the equator ... but that is what makes travel talk so special.

Next on this *Travel Times* reporter's agenda – a trip to the mall for back-to-school shopping with my soon-to-be eighth grader. Happiness...it comes in many different ways.



Tips to know before you go

1. Each individual must pay a \$100.00 tax to enter in the country. This is done at customs once you arrive in the Santiago airport.
2. Bring a small Spanish dictionary for the basic words you may need to communicate for directions and ordering. Pointing works in a pinch!
3. Hydrate before, during and after your trip. The altitude difference will affect most travelers.
4. Familiarize yourself just a bit with the money exchange. It varies from city to city. These are generally honest people so if you can't get the hang of it do not worry that you are getting short changed. It is part of traveling abroad.
5. Be ever so generous with your tipping. The Chileans work exceptionally hard to please the tourists.
6. Pack any toiletries that you might need. Ladies; Chilean woman use different products than we are use to!