Exchange Report

Choosing Chile

I decided to do an exchange in Chile because for the longest time doing an exchange was a requirement for my program. Other than that, I wanted to study the culture and geography of a country that I don’t often hear about. I also wanted to continue learning Spanish as well in a non-European country. Simon Fraser University doesn’t have many exchange programs in South America; Ecuador, Chile and Argentina. I chose Chile because their school calendar fitted my own schedule better.

Preparation for exchange

My exchange for Pontificia Universidad Catolica De Chile (PUC or Catolica) occurred during their second term – Summer/Fall 2016. I also major in International Studies so this may not necessarily apply to you.

Some of my resources, that I found invaluable, were the study aboard advisors; she was the point of contact between the host institution and me. The previous SFU exchange report, though several years outdated, was also helpful. My colleague and fellow SFU exchange Student provided, as well, provided information about Chile and life there in general. And finally, my Spanish professors, who are from Latin America, told me what to expect in Santiago.

Other than that, the use of online resources and exchange reports from other institutions (e.g. UBC and PUC’s website) were also helpful in planning.

Student Visa

During my budgeting, I underestimated the cost of obtaining a student visa. Contact the consulate general for updated info. But the cost of it is roughly 135 USD. There is also a health checkup performed by a specific doctor, which is not covered by the government. That’s roughly $2-300 CAD.

Climate

Chile is hot and dry. It feels like a Mediterranean country to me – at least in Santiago. Overall, the country has a diverse climate. The far north is a dry desert and the south is cold and windy.

Since the country is below the equator, the seasons are the opposite. Summer in Vancouver is winter in Chile. Though snow in Santiago proper is very rare.

Buildings in Santiago do not have central heating systems. Windows do not close completely as there is are small gaps that allow air flow.

Packing

I arrived in Santiago during their winter. It honestly was not that cold. A sweater or two, scarf and a jacket was enough for most occasions. And for Patagonia, normal winter wear suffices. I also brought things to Santiago that would remind me of home.

Smog
Smog is prevalent in Santiago. The air quality gets worst as you go further west. Where I lived, Las Condes on the eastern side of Santiago, it wasn’t too bad, but you could still feel the difference compared to Vancouver.

Transportation

There is a bus that goes from the airport to Santiago called centropuerto which is 1,700 CLP one way. There is also TransVip which is a shared taxi service. There is a booth in the Airport terminal when you exit customs; you can also reserve online.

The Santiago metro system is one of the most extensive in South America. And it connects to the San Joaquin and Casa Central campuses. The other two campuses are a short walk away. It and the buses uses the BIP card which is kind of like the compass card. You can get that at a metro station. I find myself loading $20 on the card each week.

Banking

Santiago is a mostly credit based system. But street vendors accept only cash. As such, if you have a Scotiabank account, you can use their ATMs.

There is also a bank called Banco Internacional in barrio Las Condes near estacion El Golf where I could withdraw money from my Vancity debit card without paying a withdrawal fee. Other than that, the cost of living is slightly cheaper.

Healthcare

Healthcare in Chile is comparable to Canada. When I was sick, I went to the third floor of Hall Universitario and made an appointment. The hospital clinic is on campus. And it was cheaper than going to a private clinic. Then, I would get reimbursed by my insurance.

During Exchange

I decided to live with a host family. I used the links provided by PUC to find an agency and they responded quickly.

Lectures are the same format as SFU however classes are a bit longer. Each block rather than being 50 minutes are an hour and a half. The grading scale is also out of 7 and there is a Wikipedia page remarking on it. Finally, during the first two weeks of the semester, you can attend any class. Afterwards, you go to the advisor of that course department to register for the class.

Country info

You can visit Valparaiso and Vina del Mar pretty easily. It’s a two hour bus ride. Another place is Cajon de Maipu which is also easily accessible by public transit. The former locations are seaside cities with beaches, interesting graffiti and architecture; the latter has places where you can raft.

The host institution has a student group (CAUC) that organizes events for exchange students. These include parties, travelling and tours among other things. Within and around the school, there are performances during lunch period that is free to attend. Finally, take advantage of the student discounts.

Reflection after exchange
In hindsight, I wished I learnt more Spanish before arriving to Santiago. Their Chileno is a lot faster than standard Spanish. As well, I feel that I should have learnt more about the country; stuff outside the guidebooks such as its politics. I found some slight stereotyping but I believe that’s more because they haven’t meet a lot of people with eastern Asian heritage. Other than that, Chilenos are quite kind and friendly and I found Santiago to be a safe city. Use common sense and enjoy your time there.

Vina del mar (A close city roughly two hours away)
The downtown campus of PUC (Casa Central)

A picture of friends
A football/soccer match at a stadium that is close to campus San Joaquin