Exchange Report-Chile
Pontificia Universidad Catolica
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By Michelle Bouchard
Intro— I decided to do an exchange in Chile after having completed an exchange in Ecuador and after having travelled in Columbia for 4 months. I guess since I study geography, I naturally have the curiosity to explore new countries. I wanted to continue learning Spanish and do another exchange in South America. SFU doesn’t have many exchange programs in South America so I only had the choice between Chile and Argentina. Chile’s school calendar coincided more closely with the Canadian school year so for that reason alone, I decided to go to Chile. Having no contacts or previous knowledge about Chile, I boarded another plane and headed off for yet another adventure.

Chile— What strikes me the most about Chile is its diverse environment. This country is long and narrow being over 4000km in length and less than 400km wide. Chile is a relatively isolated country bordered by the Pacific Ocean to the west and separated from Argentina by the Andean mountains to the east. Chile’s north has the driest desert in the world (the Atacama desert) while it’s south contains glaciers and fjords.

Climate: Chile is not a tropical country! While the north is extremely hot and dry the majority of the country undergoes the four seasons. When packing to study at the university of Santiago, pack for a climate similar to that of Vancouver. Since Chile is located on the southern part of the equator, their seasons occur opposite to ours. With June and July being the coldest months and December and January the warmest.

Buildings in Chile do not have a central heating system so places are cold. While in Canada we are used to being cold outdoors but wearing only a t-shirt inside in Chile one is constantly cold in winter. Like Chileans you will soon learn to wear big jackets and scarves inside buildings to keep warm.

Spanish— The Spanish accent in Chile is so different that they actually say they speak “Chilean” as opposed to Spanish. After spending 9 months in South America and figuring I had a fairly decent level of Spanish comprehension, I arrived in Chile and spent my first few weeks struggling to understand what anyone said. In general, Chileans don’t pronounce words clearly, running words together and dropping the “s” at the end of words. While the initial month was a challenge, I slowly picked up their slang and got used to their way of speaking.

Santiago: Santiago is the capital city where almost 50% of Chile’s population is concentrated. The city is extremely large and is one of the most modern cities in South America. In Santiago museums are free on Sundays to the general public so I recommend you take advantage of this.

Smog— While Santiago is located in front of the Andes; the terrible smog layer makes the mountain practically invisible especially during June and July (their winter months.) Similar to the process in the Fraser valley, the air current coming from the Pacific Ocean traps the smog against the surrounding mountains. While I have seen polluted cities before, the poor air quality of Santiago was astonishing; on some days looking even as far as to the end of the block was even hazy. I recommend hiking some of the nearby
mountain to get some “fresh air” and to see just how thick and extensive Santiago’s smog really is.

**The metro**—Santiago has a modern metro system that allows one to move rapidly across town and to most of the university’s campuses. Unlike Canada one does not get a transfer ticket so bus connections costs extra. Unfortunately as an exchange student, one cannot buy student tickets (a third the regular price) as this discount is only for Chileans. The metro costs about $0.60 a ticket but it goes up to about $0.70 in peak hours. It is cheapest to buy a metro card since there is a discount when you buy tickets in quantities of two or more. Also with a metro card, one can take the last few metros at night when no more tickets are being sold.

**Money**—Santiago has to be one of the most expensive cities in Central America. That being said, the living expenses equal about half of that in Vancouver. To get an idea, rent costs about $200 and a metro ride costs about $0.60. Unfortunately exchange students can’t qualify for student fares!

I brought most of my money in traveller’s cheques like I usually do when I am travelling. In Chile banks do no accept traveler’s cheque so I had to use money-exchange businesses. These exchange centres, however, did not give good exchange rates for my checks decreasing the amount by at least 10 pesos per dollar. I recommend that while in Chile you use your bankcard. Almost all bank machines in this country accept foreign bankcards, so it is very convenient.

**Lodging**—I did not make any lodging arrangements ahead of time, as the prices quoted by the university seemed expensive and I figured it would be much cheaper to look around when I arrived in Chile. Before leaving Canada I found a travel book in a library and photocopied a few pages on different hostels I could stay at for my first few days. When I was on the plane, I asked the Chilean sitting next to me which of the hostels on my list he recommended and as it turned out I went to a hostel in his neighbourhood so we were able to share a taxi. After resting up from the plane ride I set out the next morning in search of a cheaper hostel. Where I had staid cost about $13 dollars a night so without my bags I was able to go and check out different hostel prices. I didn’t want to appear too much like a tourist with my street map in my hand so I decided to duck into the entrance to someone’s house. The elderly women who owned the house saw that I was tourist and invited me in to help me find where it was that I was going. We started chatting a while and before you knew it she had invited me to live with her for either the semester or simply a few days until I found another place to live. I ended up living with this family in Barrio Brazil for a week until I found a place closer to the university. I kept asking students at school if they knew of a place to rent and ended up staying with a Chilean women near Santa Isabel metro station. I rented a small room for 90 000 pesos (about $180). This price included everything, electricity, gas, water and even phone. We all did our own cooking and could use the washing machine when we wanted. The house was pretty close to school, a ten-minute walk to the metro and then a ten-minute metro ride.

While I liked the house and location where I lived, the Chilean woman I stayed with wasn’t very personable. I lived in a house where many exchange students had stayed
before so I didn’t find the Chilean owner to be friendly. Often she would secretly eat my food and refused to give me telephone messages. Had I lived in Chile longer I probably would have looked for another place to live hence why I am not writing down this woman’s contact information.

**Food**—I didn’t find Chilean food all that exciting, and being a vegetarian the options were even more limited. Note, some restaurants titled “vegetarian” consider chicken and fish as vegetable. Chileans eat 4 meals a day. Breakfast (usually consisting of bread), a large lunch, at about 5 or 6 they have tea and bread (with jam or cold cuts) called “Once” and if they are hungry a late dinner before going to bed. Chileans eat a lot of bread and meat; after Germany they have the 2nd highest per capital bread consumption. The bread is always fresh and makes good cheese or avocado sandwiches. The fruit and vegetables in the markets are similar to what we are used to here. Where I lived I did all my own cooking so I didn’t have a hard time making familiar recipes.

Restaurant prices in Santiago are a bit less expensive than here in Canada but not by much. An average lunch eaten out for example will cost around 4 to 6 dollars. Wine, however, is cheap and delicious. One can buy a litter of wine in a carton for little over a dollar. Some things to try: empenadas de queso (a pastry stuffed with cheese) torta de choclo (a corn pie) and cherimoya (a delicious local fruit).

**School**—Compared to my exchange in Ecuador, this school was a lot less ritzy and superficial. While the students were still from a higher social class, most of the students dressed more casual.

The school consists of four campuses: San Jauoquin, Casa Central, el Contador and campus Oriente). The exchange office is located in casa central (metro station Universidad de Chile). All my classes were at San Jauquin, which is the largest campus and where most faculties are.
**Registration** - Registration is relatively simple for exchange students. Basically you have a two-week trial period where you can attend all the classes you are interested in. At the end of these two weeks you must submit a form with your course selection to the exchange office. Many faculties you can simply register yourself in as seats are saved for exchange students. A list of the faculties in which you can register yourself in is given in the exchange manual. For the other faculties one needs to get a stamp of approval from the secretary of the faculty department.

**Courses** - I was able to get every course that I wanted, in fact, I didn’t hear of any exchange students who couldn’t get a course they wanted. I took 4 academic courses while I was there: Geog of Chile, Chilean culture, Agronomy course on managing natural resources and an Education course on teaching P.E. I also took a mountain climbing course, which Chilean students can take for credit.

While the level of knowledge expected by the professors is lower; there are many small assignments that keep one busy. Many of my professors could read English and let me write my assignments in English. While in Ecuador many of my readings were in English, at this university all readings were in Spanish. As opposed to SFU where a typical student is swamped with readings, most professors do not assign many readings. The majority of courses last 5 months and consist of two midterms and a final exam. As opposed to the 50-minute lectures at SFU, lectures usually last 80 minutes. The other major difference from Canadian schools is that most work is done in groups as opposed to competitive individual work.

Our method of transportation for a class field trip.

**Spanish language courses:** these courses are not included in the exchange program and cost an extra $300 dollars for each course you would like to take. At the beginning of the semester one can take a Spanish placement test and those who do poorly can take an intermediate Spanish review course for free. For the advanced courses in Spanish language, each student must pay. I did not know this before going and was disappointed to find this out upon my arrival.
Clubs/sports courses - I highly recommend one gets involved with the sports clubs as there are many options and it’s a good way to meet people. I joined the mountain climbing course where not only did I learn a ton of useful information but also met all my friends who I hung out with for the semester. While Chileans have to take sports for credits, exchange students have the option to register for the course, or simply attend for fun. The mountain climbing course consisted of more exchange students than Chilean and was definitely a good way to meet people. We went on several weekend camping trips, which made it easy to meet people. If Ernesto is still teaching this course you are guaranteed to have a blast. I can’t recommend this course enough!!

While the sports courses are free, most clubs have a small fee. I joined the Cuban salsa group, which cost $20, and the African dance class that was $40. There are many other extra curricular courses that one can join such as yoga, photography, capoiera, modern dance, guitar, theatre, drawing and many more.

The Andes Mountains, taken near Santiago

Some of the friends I met in the mountain climbing club
Travel- Get out of Santiago whenever possible. SanPedro de Atacama, Pucon, and Torres del Paine are just a few of the popular place that tourists like to visit. If you love hiking or camping, there are many national parks that one can visit. Many of the Andes Mountains have summits at high elevations so bring warm hiking clothes and good boots if you’re up for the challenge.

The Altiplano near San Pedro

Chile versus Ecuador- So would I recommend Chile over Ecuador for a country to do an exchange, I guess it depends on what one is looking for. To learn Spanish for someone who is a beginner, have an opportunity to go to the rain forest and experience Andean culture go to Ecuador. For an extraordinarily diverse environment, less elite school, and less exchange students, I would recommend Chile. Both experiences were unique; I have memories and friends from each country that will last me a lifetime. While going on the exchanges have prolonged the time it will take me to complete my degree, veering from the geography department to the Spanish, my two semesters abroad have been by far the highlight of my university career. Now with only two more semesters of school until graduation, I look forward to the day when I will have the opportunity to go back to South America. Latin America has much to teach Canadians. Go with an open mind, be friendly and your guaranteed to have a great time.