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THE AMERICAS

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Tourism in Chile

By Peter Keller

September, 2000

PUERTO VARAS, Chile – Chileans have a “secret” they are keeping from the rest of the world. Although some in Chile are trying to let the information out, most are unknowingly continuing this “joke” they have played upon the other continents. If I didn’t know any better, I would think I could hear the sounds of nervous giggles, the kind made by school children playing “hide and seek” just before being sought. We in North America and Europe have been duped into thinking all of South America — or Latin America, for that matter — is not worth our time, especially our cherished vacations. We tend to lump all of the countries of South America together and think of them as being equal in the level of crime, poverty, pollution and general chaos.

However, two countries stand apart from this stereotype, Argentina and Chile. A tourist visiting either of these countries is likely to think they are in Europe rather than South America due to the ease of travel (excellent bus systems), comfortable lodging and sanitary conditions (water safe to drink straight from the tap, which I wouldn’t advise elsewhere on this continent). Obviously, a strong connection exists between tourism and national parks (the focus of my fellowship) — almost like the chicken and the egg — so much that I am dedicating this newsletter to tourism within Chile.

Chileans are slowly losing hold of the secret because even some expatriates have caught on to this subconscious plot. I have a friend from the States who lives in Chile and works for a North America based company with an office in Puerto Montt. When he is in the office he works hard, is efficient, and gets the job done. Nevertheless, he spends a lot of time out of the office while he enjoys a two-hour lunch break, plays golf at the local course, takes an extra day off for a long week-end of fly-fishing, hunting or skiing. He knows how to enjoy the finer things in life, especially food and wine, which he has the best of during social gatherings at his house. He knows the Chilean secret and is not about to tell his counterparts in the Seattle office. Some things, they don’t need to know. He wouldn’t trade positions with them if they offered to, and would probably look for another job down here if told to return home.

One caveat about this secret — Santiago, the capital with five million people — is not Chile. There is even a saying to describe this; “*Santiago no está Chile.*” If Santiago ever had this knowledge, it was given up long ago. This “secret” that is not really a secret is the quality of life — the customs, geographical diversity and cultural heritage. The stress levels of daily life are relatively low compared to other developed countries. It is still customary for stores to close for lunch break as families reunite to share the main meal of the day. During summer months many families leave the cities and spend time together in the countryside relaxing at the family plot of land (*campo*) or renting a *cabaña*. Throughout the year various customs are celebrated in a variety of festivals. Independence Day is the most prominent of these celebrations. In Chile this is September 18th (this year marked 190 years of independence from Spain), but in reality the celebration takes place the entire week leading up to it. A visit to the local rodeo will put you in the center of festivities. At the rodeo, besides live music and dancing, many tradi-



riding, mountain biking, hot springs, mountaineering and sand boarding, to name a few. And once you reach the site of your desired activity you will find the area nearly void of other people, especially if you travel during the off-season. The Chilean tourist season runs from December through March, but the height of the season is January and February, when many Chileans take their summer holiday.

Quality of life also includes cultural heritage. In Chile this ranges from stoned-carved Moai statues on Easter Island to German villages in the 10th region. Within this spectrum are the indigenous people of Chile, including the more prominent Mapuche and Pehuenche people of southern Chile. The mystic island of Chiloé, the largest in Chile, has a rich tradition of folklore and legend that has contributed greatly to national literature. And, of course, many parts of the country continue to exhibit a strong influence from Spain in architecture, religion and land-use practices.

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It would seem that the quality of life within Chile would make the country a tourist Mecca. However, for example, visitors from the U.S. totaled only 125,400 in 1998 (nearly doubling from 67,500 in 1993). So then, why isn't Chile overrun with travel-crazed foreigners from the Northern Hemisphere? Two reasons: time and money. According to tourism-research consultant Charles Gauntt, these two factors play the largest role in determining whether a potential visitor will come to Chile. Chile is very remote from North America and Europe. Just the time spent in transit, an average of 32-hours round-trip, screens out many people without the time necessary to make the journey worthwhile. The other factor, money, limits those lacking *dinero* for a \$1,000-or-more

tional dishes can be enjoyed, like *curanto* (a plate of seafood, potatoes and a variety of meats), *empanadas*, *longanizas* (sausages), *salchichas* (hot dogs) and *cazuela* (soup with large chunks of chicken, potatoes and squash).

The quality of life also includes the geographical diversity within the Country. It is possible to explore mountains, desert, tropical islands, beaches, the sea, lakes, rivers, temperate rainforests, Mediterranean landscapes, glaciers, and a slice of the polar icecap. Each geographical type has a diversity of wildlife and vegetation distinct to that setting. For the adventure-seeking traveler or resident, the list of possible recreational activities is nearly endless, but just to tease you I will provide a short list of fun things to do: Surfing, skiing, hiking, camping, rafting, kayaking, windsurfing, sightseeing, rock and ice climbing, photography, horseback

round-trip ticket — not to mention the costs within the country. Prices generally run less for grocery items than those do in the United States. For example, bread and cheese is about half as expensive and a good bottle of red wine can cost only \$3-6. However, prices for independent travel are much higher (fuel prices are close to \$3.00 per gallon and cars rent for \$40 per day minimum). A third reason, reversed seasons, can cut in both directions. If you want to ski in August or play at the beach in January, then Chile is the place. Although, on the other hand, many vacationers from the Northern Hemisphere don't want to spend their summer break traveling through the rain and cold weather, and perhaps prefer to be at home during the December holidays.

Through his research, Charles (originally from Alaska,

but who now lives in Puerto Varas with his German wife and Chilean-born son) has determined that almost all English-speaking visitors belong to one of three groups. Either they are international business travelers, university-age students or retired people. Each has particular expectations and needs. For example, university students are looking for an experience that will bring them closer to nature and give them a better understanding of the culture. Their backpacks and copies of the Chile *Lonely Planet* guidebook easily identify this type of traveler. In total, English-speaking visitors represent only 12 percent of tourists visiting Chile. Although they account for a small percentage of visitors they make up for it in economic contributions. For instance, over one-third of credit-card purchases made in Chile by foreigners in 1999

were initiated by North Americans. The amount spent has increased by 25 percent over last year's mark in June. Of course this may only be representative of our appetite as a nation for spending money without the cash to pay for it.

In general, foreign visitors to Chile totaled 1.8 million in 1998, up from 1.4 million in 1993. They spent U.S.\$1.2 billion during visits to Chile in 1998, which is an increase of 20 percent from the prior year. A majority of foreign tourists are from Argentina, nearly 50 percent. European travelers comprise 25 percent of foreign visitors with Germans ranking the highest in this category. According to the Chilean National Statistical Institute, tourism will reach seven percent of the gross domestic product in the year 2000, ranking behind manufacturing, mining, wholesale and retail trade, transport and communications, financial services and construction.

Interestingly enough, statistics regarding internal tourism (Chileans visiting other parts of the country) are limited. After extensive research I finally found information on how many Chileans travel within the country, but the information included only three of the major population centers. Also, no statistics could be found on the economic benefits of internal tourism. In 1998, of the three cities surveyed, 2.3 million Chileans took a vacation for five days or more, of which two million were from Santiago. This doesn't reveal much, except that nearly half of the people living in Santiago get out of town for a vacation each year.

To continue growth in the tourism sector, the Chilean government and various associations have created an al-



The main event at the Puerto Varas Rodeo on Independence Day. The objective is for the Huasos (Chilean cowboys) to pin the steer against the wall with their horses. Points are awarded for frequency and style.

phabet soup of entities to promote Chilean tourism. The government agency leading this effort is the National Tourism Service, also known as Sernatur (an abbreviation for *Servicio Nacional de Turismo*). The mission of the agency is quite simple — to development and promote tourism in Chile. This work is done by nearly 180 people in Sernatur throughout 12 regional offices and the main office in Santiago. At a recent tourism conference I attended the Director of Sernatur, Oscar Santelices, stated his philosophy on the key to tourism. "Not only does the tourist need to come once, but rather we need them to repeat visits and bring



The Director of the National Tourism Service (Sernatur), Oscar Santelices, addressing a tourism guides conference.

their friends and family. To achieve this there must be a product of superior quality.” He went on to say one major bottleneck that impedes the development of tourism is the lack of cooperation and coordination within the tourism sector in Chile.

From my experiences in Chile, the comments of the Sernatur Director are right on target. Also, I add to his comments that quality alone — whether found in lodging, food, guide service or transportation — is not enough. Along with quality of product, the concept of service is equally important. Visitors want to feel welcomed and attended to in any setting, and if so they will patronize that business again and/or recommend it to fellow travelers. The quality of service in Chile has room for improvement. At times it can be frustrating, especially if you don’t know the tricks to activate the system. At bus stations the ticket vender is often talking to an adjacent colleague or on the phone with a friend. Just standing in front of the desk will get you nowhere; rather, you have to interrupt the conversation with, “Oye,” and then continue, “Yo quiero comprar un pasaje, por favor.” Also, in restaurants the wait staff will not return to your table voluntarily after serving your food, unless you make eye contact and reel them in. And then after the meal, the bill doesn’t come automatically, one must ask for it. Once it arrives be prepared to pay immediately — the waiter will be expecting to take your money without delay.

Sernatur is guided by the National Council of Tourism (*Consetur*), a group of people representing various aspects of the tourism industry that helps set the direction and course of tourism promotion efforts by Sernatur. The *Corporación de Promoción Turística de Chile* produces marketing tools such as brochures and maintains the official tourism WebPages in cooperation with Sernatur. To add further letters to the growing pot of alphabet soup, the Chilean Association of Tourism Businesses (*ACHET*) provides member businesses with industry information and offers courses to increase service capabilities. They also work to set guidelines of self-regulation in a market that is unregulated. A handful of other organizations exist, such as *Corfo* (which maintains production statistics), *Cata* (an adventure tourism association), and *ProChile* and *The Chile Foundation*, which are involved in the development and promotion of Chilean tourism.

In Chile, tourism guides are relied upon more than in the



A guided group preparing for the all day hike to the top of Volcano Villarrica. The tourist agency provides all the protective clothing and equipment.

United States. Many travelers who pride themselves on their independence must adapt to the Chilean system of working through tourist agencies. To hire an English-speaking guide in an upscale location like Viña del Mar, an oceanside resort near Santiago, will cost about \$60 to \$80 for the entire day. And for the adventure travelers who wants to climb Volcano Villarrica near the town of Pucón, it is nearly impossible without hiring a guide. The two largest companies for adventure tourism in Pucón, *Sol y Nieve* and *Trancura*, nearly have the market cornered. During the tourist high season from December through March they run daily expeditions up the volcano (2,840 meters) in groups of 20 people, with two to four groups per agency, or more. Conaf manages Villarrica National Park, which includes the Volcano. In cooperation with various organizations they have developed regulations for any commercially led adventure-tourism excursion within Conaf parks and reserves.

These regulations for general adventure tourism were created in 1995 through a cooperative agreement between Sernatur, Conaf, the Navy, the Chilean Andean Federation and the Association of Adventure Tourism Agencies. They define adventure tourism as, “A recreational activity that utilizes the natural environment as a resource in producing a variety of emotions and sensations of discovery and exploration in the practice of outdoor activities of a certain risk.” The agreement sets general norms for employees and businesses that provide adventure tourism opportunities. The activities regulated (on Conaf lands) range from mountain climbing and skiing to kayaking and diving, plus hang gliding. For example, the regulations for rafting include requirements that the Navy authorize guides and rafts be reg-

istered with the nearest Port Captain. Also, a list of instructions is required to be given by the guide to the passengers. The regulations add a list of equipment that is obligatory for each raft, such as life jackets, helmets, rescue rope and repair kit. For each adventure sport activity there is a specific list of requirements.

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Since guides are such an integral part of tourism in Chile I was curious to find out more about the guiding profession. And just my luck, the 3rd National Conference of Tourism Guides and Hospitality Professionals was recently held in my newest adopted hometown — Puerto Varas — from September 1-3. The conference turned out as I had expected — a little disorganized, but filled with an assortment of social events. Nearly 150 guides from Chile, Argentina and Brazil attended the conference. The first session began right on time — meaning 45 minutes behind schedule. Following the singing of the national anthem and greetings from the usual political dignitaries (the mayor and congressional representative) the discussion led into the main issue of this meeting — a proposal to certify tourism professionals in terms of competency, quality and capability. The idea is to license professionals in the tourism sector, similar to other professions such as architects and doctors. One objective of this proposal is to regulate and ensure the quality of guiding services for tourists. There seemed to be overwhelming approval of the idea, but little agreement on how to go about this task.

As an example of what has been done in other countries, a group of Argentines were invited to the conference to present one aspect of certification — the education process. Several instructors from the San Carlos de Bariloche School of Guides presented a panel discussion on their experiences in Argentina. The school, founded in 1993, has courses that include administration of tourism agencies, marketing, management of natural resources, public relations, foreign-language training, history of the region and guiding specific adventure-tourism activities. The panelists concluded with a list of the most important traits a guide should offer to the client, such as security, care, advice, accuracy and education.

The post-panel question-and-answer session revealed some of the tensions between Chilean and Argentinean guides. The President of the Santiago Guides Association strongly suggested that a Chilean guide should accompany any guided trips originating in Argentina with stops in Chile. The audience, dominated by Chileans, voiced their approval of this idea with a boisterous cheer. I could sense that Argentineans seated before this partisan crowd were feeling uncomfortable. They responded the best way they could, by keeping quiet and nodding their heads in agreement with the crowd. They knew that even in Argentina with a system of certification, it is still difficult to con-

trol the guiding profession. Each guide generally sees him or herself as his or her own boss and often do what he or she wants. And if they have a group of clients that want to go to Chile, the guides are not about to split any profits just to hire another guide.

The objection to Argentinean guided trips in Chile spawned another comment expressed by a local guide. This person expressed a desire to regulate any foreign guided trips into Chile that come from North America and Europe. He was frustrated by the independence of these groups and their unwillingness to hire local guides. Many times these groups come self-contained, with their own guide, prepared food and transportation. They are not seen as a benefit to the economy because they are not spending money on local businesses. Hearing this statement, I wondered what kind of message this would send to foreign travelers. My guess is that the word would spread that Chile is unfriendly toward foreign groups — just the opposite of what the tourism industry is seeking. This type of reaction, without regard to consequences, has happened before. For example, for some reason the United States immigration office has started charging Chileans a \$45 visa application fee. In response, the Chilean Government now charges a \$45 entry fee to anyone visiting Chile from the United States. In the Santiago airport a large sign in front of the customs station singles out citizens of the United States (and Canada) to ante up the cash, while other nationalities breeze through without any payment. (Hint: If you are planning to visit me, bring enough cash to clear this first hurdle).

After the panel discussion, tensions subsided and by the end of the first evening the Argentines were accepted into the group as if they were brethren. As with most conferences, the exciting and interesting parts take place outside of the presentation room. Contacts made in hallways, discussions during lunch or socializing at the evening shindig are the true benefits of these gatherings. The first night, confer-



Preparing the rafts for our trip down the Class III Petrohue River.

ence organizers threw a party to show off local hospitality. After several pisco sours, glasses of wine and *chicha* (fermented apple or grape juice) everyone gathered on the dance floor as the polka-like music initiated the start of *Cueca* — the national dance. Since I was one of only two North Americans attending the conference everybody seemed to know my name, but I had a hard time remembering all these new names. Even so they treated me as if I were an old friend they hadn't seen for months. The usual shyness of Chileans in business settings quickly dissipated as the night progressed. However, next morning everyone was back into "business" mode. Fortunately, each day the ratio between conference meetings and fiestas tilted a little more towards having fun. By the last day I didn't spend one moment in a stuffy conference room sitting on an uncomfortable chair; instead I participated in an intense workshop of the utmost importance — rafting the Petrohue River.

Other workshops at the conference included fly-fishing, bird watching, a tour of agronomy attractions and a lecture profiling English-speaking visitors. Along with 30 other conference goers I chose rafting, for obvious reasons. The source of the Petrohue River (the word is pronounced pay-tro-way) is Lake Todos Los Santos in Vicente Pérez Rosales National Park, about one hour by car from Puerto Varas. The one-and-a-half-hour rafting trip along a class-III section of the river starts on national park land, but at the take-out point there is no public access. The only access possible is through private land and rafting groups must pay the landowner for each passage about U.S.\$10. The concept of easements, or a right-of-way across private land, whether for recreation or conservation purposes, is just beginning to emerge in Chile. In the United States easements have been used in a variety of ways to maintain rights to the use of someone else's land. With the owners' permission, this right is maintained in perpetuity (i.e. open space on a Vermont farm or river access on a Montana ranch) and owners are compensated through reduced property taxes. I have met several people in Chile that are exploring this legal theory here for possible use to protect native forests on private lands and to ensure public access to popular recreation areas, such as Petrohue River. At the take-out point the road through private land had washed out several months before during a winter storm. However, it still hasn't been fixed and rafting groups have kept paying the fee. As we carried our eight-person raft one kilometer to reach our vehicles on the other side of the washed-out road, I could only believe that if

an easement were in place the road would be fixed.

After the rafting trip we returned to Puerto Varas for a quick lunch before conferees regrouped and were transported to the village of Maullín — an hour west, tucked away in a bay adjacent to the Pacific Ocean. Here we were treated to local hospitality one last time at a traditional *Curanto* feast with *Cueca* dancing. The final task after dinner and drinks was for the conference organizers to hand out certificates of participation. My new friends told me this has become a tradition in its own right at any type of conference in Chile. Each of the 150 participant names was read off one at a time and that person came forward to receive their "diploma." Part of the fun of this event is to yell and clap for your friends as their names are called. The challenge is to embarrass them as much as possible during their walk down the "runway." I had noticed how some sneaked out of the room before their name was announced; next time I will be smart enough to do the same.

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A week later another tourism conference occurred, but this time in Chaitén (200 Kilometers south). The invitation-only meeting, titled the First World Conference of Southern Tourism, included diplomats and travel agents from ten different countries. The conference, which was more like a familiarization tour known as a "FamTour" in the travel industry, concentrated on themes for promoting Patagonia tours. The fact that tourism officials from Argentina and Chile worked together to organize the conference is a positive step. They are finally starting to catch on that visitors from abroad think of Patagonia as a distinct region, not as Chilean Patagonia and Argentine Patagonia, as is done by the local population.



Mountain scenery from the geographical area known as Patagonia.

The geographic area of Patagonia is a little smaller than the province of British Columbia; it includes the southern tip of South America from the Puerto Montt-San Carlos de Bariloche area to Cape Horn. Just the word 'Patagonia' spawns a bath of images that provokes a desire to visit. Perhaps the clothing company by the same name has spurred on this imagery with inspirational photos from wildlands around the world. It certainly would not hurt the local economy to capitalize on what has become a trademark for the essence of wilderness — Patagonia.

The origin of the word lay in a 1520 expedition led by Portuguese explorer Ferdinand Magellan, who pioneered passage through the Strait that now bears his name. His expedition named the mainland of the southern tip of South America 'Tierra de los Patagones' because of the physical appearance of the people they had encountered. According to expedition notes these people were stout, averaging over six feet high with thin, elongated heads. When they walked they left huge tracks, particularly in the snow, because their feet were covered with animal skins. Thus the

word 'pata' meaning foot or paw (and a female duck) was used to describe the people they met and the word became 'patagón' to emphasize the giant size.

The meaning of the word has since been forgotten by many present-day travelers, but the mystery and legend of Patagonia still lives. The perception and idea of what is Patagonia differs from inside the region *versus* outside. From the outside we in the Northern Hemisphere tend to think of Patagonia as a country by itself. We say things like, "I am going to Patagonia" or "I met this guy that works in Patagonia." But from inside the region the word doesn't have as strong a hold on the psyche. From the inside very few recognize the power of that word. They are so close to the 'trees' they often bypass the 'forest.' Generally when promoting the area as a tourist destination many people I have spoken with focus more on whether it is Chile or Argentina, and then further whether it is the pampas, the Island of Tierra del Fuego, Magallanes, the ice fields, Aisén or the temperate rain forest. However it seems that the way of thinking from the inside is changing. Attendees from this

latest conference are working together from various parts of Patagonia to promote a Patagonia circuit, almost like a scenic drive, that links Bariloche, El Bolsón, Esquel, Futaleufú, Chaitén and Puerto Montt. The infrastructure of roads and services already exists; it is just a matter of letting potential visitors know about the circuit.

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Chile is like an island. Or at least that is how many Chileans explain to me their theory of life in Chile. It is at the end of the world and surrounded by formidable barriers. To the west is the Pacific Ocean, to the north is the great expanse of the Atacama Desert, on the east are the Andes that can reach 20,000 feet and to the south is more ocean and Antarctica. The physical environment has played a large role in shaping the Chilean mindset. On a recent trip to a nearby park I met a park ranger lives and works only 20 kilometers from the Argentine border, but he has never been to Argentina and doesn't desire to go. This is not unique; this story is replayed in every region I visit in Chile. It is not that they don't care about the outside world, but rather that they have everything they want right here on the 'island.' So back to that "secret," Chileans are not purposely keeping a lid on the quality of life — the daily routine, geographic diversity and cultural heritage — some just take it for granted and do not realize that what they possess is truly extraordinary. Now the only real unknown left is whether the quality of life will remain the same as the rest of the world discovers what Chile has to offer? □



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