

Santiago, Chile 2007

The air was smoggy due to the exhaust of many old cars and buses, but also because of the geography of the area which does not allow the smog to blow away. The locals are friendly and there is a good sprinkling of people with varying degrees of English; although many of them were trying to get money out of us for a variety of reasons. And just like in much of Europe, there was always someone who has a relative living in Melbourne. Our Spanish vocabulary was growing.

Our hotel showed times of a prosperous past with ornate wallpaper and brocade curtains, but behind the musty old curtains was a brick wall or a view of rubbish bins.

We tried the local drink: pisco sour. Pisco is a strong spirit, like brandy, and is served with lime juice, sugar and egg white. It was good, but one was enough!



There are 6 million people in Santiago, living in a variety of accommodation from mansions with swimming pools through to shanty towns and everything in between. Some live in apartment blocks but many also live in housing estates consisting of hundreds of identical, small, two story houses. The more upmarket ones are painted in various bright colours. Most things cost about the same or a bit less than they do in Australia but as the average wage is much, much lower, it must be difficult for many of them.

We had two meals in an outdoor café in the main square where we watched thousands of people go by. One way people make money is to sell anything they can think of in this square and the surrounding streets. All you need is a square metre of blue plastic and a collecting of socks, CDs (sure to be knock offs) or toys which you spread out to sell. These people look remarkably well dressed despite their unusual way of trying to make a living. However, when the carabineros (police) come by on their motor bikes, these sellers grab their goods and disappear in an instant. Within 5 minutes they are all back again.

I would hate to need any of the emergency services in Chile as the streets are clogged for most of the time and even if they have lights flashing or sirens going no one (pedestrians or motorist) bothers to give way to them.

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The city has a number of magnificent old churches, many adorned with gold and silver showing a much more prosperous past. However on the steps at the entrance to most of these churches are a number of beggars, often with limbs missing. The contrast between the wealth of the church and these people's situation is stark.



A winery tour to the south gave us bit of a look at the surrounding area and the mountains. The wine industry is growing in Chile but nearly all of it is exported. One of the wineries that we visited was owned for many years by a local family but was recently sold to a Columbian. The winery was very high tech in most aspects except that the grapes are still picked by hand because it's cheaper. They also employ women to pick only the best grapes from the bunches to make their premium sauvignon cabernet, any grapes that are not perfect go into a lesser wine.

The wineries that we visited were Vino Underagga and Casillero Del Diablo. Casillero Del Diablo translates as Devil's Locker. It came about many years ago because the winery was experiencing quite a bit of theft of wine from the cellar so they told their workers that the cellar was haunted by the devil and the pilfering stopped! [Casillero Del Diablo wines are now readily available in Melbourne and are highly recommended for their great value.]



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On the tour we also met three people who were in Chile on business. A New Zealand microbiologist who worked for an ice cream company who wanted to import ice creams to sell in NZ and Australia; a Taiwanese businessman selling pharmaceuticals and a psychologist from the UK who was giving lessons in management and HR. Quite an interesting bunch.

After the winery tour we had 4 large wine goblets to add to our luggage. We later used one in a hotel that didn't provide a glass in the bath room. One broke, but 3 of them got home safely after 5 more weeks of travelling.

Most of the technology is at least 20 years behind anything you would find in Australia. There are not many mobiles being used in the street although the market had lots of stalls selling them. The computer in the hotel was on dial up modem connection and was very old. The shops vary from up-market department stores to stalls crammed with knickknacks, clothes or whatever. And then there's the street musicians and even people that sell instant coffee from a small trolley. Food is cooked and sold in street 'stalls' made from a supermarket shopping trolley with a built in wok.

Most of the trees and plants that we saw were easily recognisable, anything from geraniums to maple trees. But surprisingly there are also lots of gum trees (particularly *Eucalyptus viminalis*), as well as some correas and grevilleas. Someone has taken them to Chile and they have done well as it is a similar climate to Australia. The gum trees in the photo below have been lopped so that the city can be viewed from an old castle on a nearby hill.



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The high Andes are quite close to Santiago but cannot be seen clearly due to the smog. After three days we were ready to leave the smog behind



And fly over the Andes to Argentina.

