

Some Glimpses of Chile
by Ehud Reiter

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Part I: Lauca: A Trip to the Altiplano

Country description: Chile is a very long (~4500km), very thin (~200km) South American country that lies between the Andes and the Pacific. Roughly speaking, the northern third of the country is primarily desert, with bits of 'altiplano' (high plateau) inland; the middle third is the fertile heartland, where 90% of the people live, and industry, agriculture, and government are concentrated; and the southern third is a Norway-type region of islands, fjords, and forests. The people are mainly of European descent, although there are some Indians left as well. Politically, the country is now a democracy, with the old dictator, Pinochet, having been turfed out in 1989. Economically, Chile is probably doing better than any other country in the continent, and there is talk of it becoming the first South American country to join the economic boom of the rest of the Pacific Rim.

Region description: One of the more accessible parts of the Northern altiplano has been preserved in Lauca National Park, which lies along the road linking Bolivia to the Chilean port of Arica (ever since Bolivia lost its ports in a 19th century war with Chile, Arica has handled most of Bolivia's sea cargo). Lauca lies at an altitude of about 4500 meters (15000 feet for you non-metric types), and its only inhabitants are a few llama-raising Indians. It is known as one of the most beautiful parks in Chile, but because of its remoteness, altitude, and lack of tourist facilities, it gets few visitors except occasional day-trippers from Arica.

Saturday, morning: I woke up early to catch my day-trip tour to Lauca from Arica, which left at 7:30AM. The tour was supposed to return at "roughly" 8PM and I wanted to go straight to the bus station to catch a night bus south, so I packed my stuff and took my backpack with me on the tour bus.

There were about 15 people in the tour, mostly foreigners but a few Chileans as well. We set off into the desert around Arica, which is supposed to be one of the most 'perfect' (i.e. rainless) deserts in the world. It certainly looked pretty bare to me - in most deserts you at least see occasional cacti, but much of the land around Arica seemed devoid of any kind of life at all. The tour guide pointed out huge line figures in the distance which had supposedly been made by primitive tribes (more or less similar to the Nazca lines, I guess).

After an hour or so we started climbing into the Andes, and the countryside turned a bit greener but we all started worrying a bit about the altitude. We were going to ascend from sea level to 4500 meters in about four hours, and altitude sickness was on everyone's mind ...

Saturday, afternoon: We entered Lauca at about 1PM, and drove through the park to Lake Chungara, claimed by the Chileans to be the highest lake in South America. We saw plenty of llamas, alpacas, and vicunas as we drove through the park, and some birds and ducks as well. Lake Chungara itself was quite a sight, with plenty of birds and ducks and two snow-capped peaks in the distance. We were lucky with the altitude, as well: only one or two of the older people got sick, and they recovered after resting a bit.

The beauty of the altiplano really made an impression on me. It's hard to explain in words, but there's a certain magic to being in a 15000 foot high wilderness area - clear air, incredibly blue skies, snow-capped mountains, llamas in the distance ... Lauca was also special in that unlike other parts of the altiplano, it had a fair bit vegetation - grass, shrubs, and other greenery added a nice touch to the blueness of the skies and the whiteness of the mountains. I'd seen bits of altiplano before in Peru and Bolivia, but Lauca was much more striking.

We left Lake Chungara at around 2:30, and drove to the small (3 families) Indian village of Parinacota. The Indian's llama herds were very striking

with their multitude of different colors, and they were tame enough to let us get very close when taking pictures. Llamas are really cute animals, and I bet one day someone will make a fortune by making llama dolls to replace teddy bears (interested venture capitalists can contact me at e.reiter@edinburgh.ac.uk ...). The village itself was also quite picturesque, with its center being the Indian's 300 year old church.

While I was wandering around Parinacota, I ran into Mark, another tourist who had also taken his backpack on the bus. We started chatting, and Mark asked me if I was "also planning to spend the night here", since I had my backpack with me. I looked confused, and Mark explained that there was a refugio (tourist hut) in the village, and he was planning to spend a night or two there in order to explore the region better, and I was most welcome to join him! I started protesting that I wasn't equipped for this - my only food was a package of cookies, my sleeping bag wasn't warm enough for the bitterly cold altiplano nights, etc, etc - but then I took another look at the incredible altiplano scenery, sighed, and told him, "Let's go take a look at the refugio".

We headed out to find the hut, accompanied by various other curious members of the tour group. It turned out to be a building at the back of the village, more or less equipped like a primitive youth hostel. There were four bunks and lots of floor space for unrolling sleeping mats, a well-equipped kitchen with gas cookers, a bathroom, and a classroom for school groups. There was also Olga, the warden, who had just graduated from college and started working for CONAF, the Chilean Parks and Forestry agency. In fact, this was Olga's first day on the job, and she was quite curious to see what her first guests would be like. Olga apologized for the lack of electricity and hot water (the necessary equipment was "under repair" or "being sent up"), and said she hoped we would stay and keep her company.

Well, I couldn't say no to that, could I? Mark and I dumped our packs in the refugio's bunkroom, and then went back to the tour bus to get a lift to Chucuyo, a nearby village where I could buy some badly needed food. The bus dropped us off there and the other tour group members waved good-bye and wished us luck, as we walked into the village. Unfortunately the store was pretty meagerly stocked - all I managed to buy was a tin of peaches, a tin of sardines, and some sweets - but there was a little restaurant where Mark and I ate a reasonable dinner (and slipped a few excess bread rolls into our bags).

There was apparently a festival of some kind coming up, and after Mark and I finished eating we went outside to watch the locals practice for it. The village girls were dancing around in red skirts and bowler hats, while the men played a motley assortment of instruments. It was quite a sight, and we clapped when they stopped to take a break.

After half an hour or so of watching the dancers and musicians, we started walking back to Parinacota. It was only 5 kilometers or so, but I was a bit worried about the altitude and told Mark to slow down and take it easy! I must say that the altiplano looked even more impressive than it had from the tour bus. You feel much more a part of the environment when you're out in the open, with no human artifacts in sight, just llamas and the stark beauty of the high plateau.

It took us an hour and a half to get back to Parinacota, where we ran into Sven, another tourists who had decided to spend the night at the refugio. Sven had hitchhiked up from Arica, and I was glad to hear that he hadn't had many problems doing this - public transport is pretty scarce in Lauca, and I suspected that I was going to have to hitchhike back to Arica, unless I could talk my way onto another tour bus.

The four of us (Mark, Sven, Olga, and I) cooked a common meal, much to my relief (they were much better prepared food-wise than I was!). The meal turned out quite well, and afterwards we sat around and talked for a few hours. Olga spoke no English, so Mark, Sven, and I made our best attempts at speaking reasonable Spanish. This worked out quite well for me, as I was able to learn a few things by listening to Mark (whose Spanish was much better than mine), while at the same time avoid feeling stupid because I was able to help Sven (whose Spanish was not that great) when he had problems.

Sunday, morning: The altiplano is bitterly cold at night, and my sleeping bag is not the greatest, so between the cold and the altitude I got very little sleep. Once I got out of bed and looked out the window at the glories of

the altiplano, though, I forgot all about such minor nuisances.

Mark, Sven, and I decided to head out and explore, and Olga said she would come with us. The first thing we discovered on leaving the refugio was a huge crowd of llamas in a pen, with a couple of villagers pushing them one by one into a water-filled trough. The villagers explained that the trough contained anti-parasite chemicals, and they had to bathe the llamas once a month in this solution. All very logical, but I thought it was a bit incongruous to find something as 20th century as anti-parasite chemicals in a setting and village that otherwise came straight out of the middle ages.

We waved good-bye to the villagers and headed out into the countryside. There are no marked trails in Lauca, of the kind that you find in US parks (and in the more popular Chilean parks, for that matter), but rather a series of dirt roads and walking paths used by the local Indians. Olga more or less knew her way around, and we followed her.

The altiplano was even more beautiful this day, as the weather was perfect - not a speck of cloud could be seen in the sky. We headed in the direction of the twin snow-capped peaks that dominated the region. I believe the higher of these was 6500 meters tall, which made it almost as high as Mt McKinley (the tallest mountain in N. America), but only 2000m above the plateau. At sea-level I could probably make a (long) day trip out of climbing a 2000m peak, but at 4500m I decided I had better not try it ... even though it would have been great to tell people back home that I had climbed a 6500m mountain in one day!

Olga showed us various lakes along the way, and I was surprised to see the amount of bird and animal life around them. I had always imagined that life would be pretty scarce at 15000 ft, but Lauca proved me wrong - it certainly wasn't as rich in plant and animal life as a forest, but there was as much here as you might find in scrub/ranching country (e.g., the American West), and a *lot* more than was found in the coastal desert!

Sunday, afternoon: We stopped for lunch at about noon, and then I decided to head back. I was starting to feel the altitude and didn't want to push things, and anyways was thinking of trying to talk my way onto a tour bus heading back to Arica, since my food was now totally gone.

It was a bit spooky heading back on my own, walking alone on the meandering paths back to Parinacota. I was a bit worried about getting lost, as the paths were not always easy to follow, but Olga told me I would be OK as long as I kept the big snow-capped peaks behind me to the right, and another mountain ahead of me to my left. The main Bolivia-Arica road was also just a few km away, and if I got really stuck I knew I could just head for that. In any event, I must have a nose for altiplano navigation, or something, because I made it back in about half the time it had taken us to walk out. I didn't even have to walk to the road (I will admit that I tried to reach it once, but had to give up when I hit an uncrossable mudbank!).

Back in Parinacota, I packed my bag and waited to see if a tour bus would show up (the tours are not regular, but only run when there is sufficient demand). I must have used up all my luck on finding my way back to the village, because the only bus that showed up was full. Oh, well ...

Mark, Sven, and Olga came back about 4PM (they had also started feeling the altitude, and hadn't gone much further than I), and assured me that my lack of food was no problem, they'd be happy to share what they had. The evening passed much like the one before, as we cooked a common meal (with a bit smaller portions this time ...) and sat around and talked. We also went out to watch the sunset, which was truly amazing at this altitude.

Monday, morning - After another sleepless night, I was pretty determined to get back to Arica, and decided to try to hitch. Mark and Sven also decided it was time to go, so the three of us said goodbye to Olga and headed off to the main road.

Mark was incredibly lucky - he was going to Bolivia, and he got a lift 30 seconds (literally) after we reached the road. Sven was also going to Arica, so we waved goodbye and started walking to the police checkpoint near Chucuyo, 5km down the road. All cars and trucks had to stop at the checkpoint, so we figured this was the best place to wait.

Well, Mark only had to wait 30 seconds, but Sven and I had to wait 4 hours (from 9:30AM to 1:30PM) for a lift - there was absolutely no traffic to the coast. One of the policemen at the checkpoint explained to us that Arica bound trucks generally only came through in the afternoon, due to the timing

of the LaPaz-Arica route. I guess he must have known what he was talking about, because at 1:30, three groups of trucks pulled into the checkpoint, with more visible in the distance. The friendly policeman `encouraged' two Bolivian drivers to take Sven, myself and a German couple who were also waiting for a lift, and we were off!

The ride down was a lot more memorable than the ride up. On the way up, I had been in a bus full of other tourists which pretty much zipped right along. Now I was sitting in the cab of a slow moving truck (the driver didn't have complete confidence in his brakes, and drove *very* slowly), which furthermore had to occasionally stop so the driver could help his friend in the other truck (which was in even worse shape). I really enjoyed the trip, though - the descent from the altiplano to the coastal desert is a spectacular one, as the scrub-like high plateau gives way to a landscape of mountain peaks, waterless deserts, and fertile river valleys. Our slow speed and my front-seat view made the scenery much more vivid than it had been during my ascent in the tour bus.

Unfortunately, at around 7PM, while we were still 50km from Arica, the two drivers stopped their trucks and declared they were going no further, and were going to spend the night here, sleeping in their trucks! They had told us when we got on that they weren't going all the way to Arica, but would be going `quite close', which we interpreted to mean 5-10km from the city - and while getting into town from 5km out was no problem (at worst an hour's walk), getting into town from 50km out was a whole different story.

It looked pretty grim for a while. Traffic was sparse and mostly moving too fast to pick up hitchhikers, and in any case we had less than an hour of daylight left before sunset. There was nothing in the area except a dirt lot where the trucks had stopped and a small roadside cafe, and while the Germans had a tent, it wouldn't hold four people. The two Bolivian drivers absolutely refused to take us any farther, apparently because there was a police checkpoint 10km down the road and they didn't have permission to cross it before tomorrow. Fortunately, a kind-hearted Chilean driver picked us up just as the sun was beginning to set, and we got into Arica at about 9PM. It had taken me 12 hours to hitchhike from Lauca to Arica, as opposed to the 4 hours the tour bus had taken on the way up. Hitching is not for the impatient!

Postscript: I think Lauca was the single most beautiful and spectacular place I visited in my three months in South America. Even now I can still easily remember the spectacular beauty of the altiplano, with herds of llamas grazing beneath snow-capped mountains and an incredibly blue sky. I highly recommend spending time there if you're anywhere near that part of Chile - but come prepared with a good supply of food, a warm sleeping bag, and perhaps a tent (especially if you intend to hitchhike!). If I had been properly equipped, I could easily have spent a week in Lauca - and if I had somehow been able to lay my hands on a 4WD vehicle to explore areas off the main road, I might still be there now ...

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Part II: Aysen: A Visit to the Frontier

Geographical Context: The Southern third of Chile is a Norway-like region of fjords and islands. There is no road that traverses the whole length of this region - sooner or later the southbound traveller must cross into the flat pampas region of Argentinian Patagonia, where the road network is much better. Most travellers bound for Tierra del Fuego and the Straits of Magellan cross the border at Bariloche and drive for 30 hours across the pampas, almost completely missing the fjords and islands of Chilean Patagonia. If one has time, however, it is possible to travel by boat and (dirt) road for almost 1000km through the fjord region, before the Patagonian icecap makes further progress impossible and forces the southbound traveller to cross into Argentina. This region of Chile is called Aysen, and it is Chile's frontier, a sparsely populated region of forests and fjords which the government is trying to convince people to settle in.

Saturday: I had arrived in Puerto Montt, the southernmost city of the Chilean heartland, about 10 days after leaving Lauca and Arica. The heartland is a beautiful area, especially its justly-famed lake region, where snow-capped volcanoes tower over pristine lakes and forests, but I have always had a desire to go to 'the ends of the Earth', and had decided to head down to Chile's far south.

Puerto Montt marks the end of the railroad, and the end of the paved highway. A few dirt roads extend part of the way into Aysen, but most traffic goes by boat. A variety of coasting vessels leave Puerto Montt every week to visit the towns and villages of Aysen, with the easiest places to get to being Chaiten, about 200km south of Puerto Montt, and Chacabuco, about 500km south of Puerto Montt and the port for Aysen's capital and biggest town, Coyhaique. Since Chacabuco was more remote, I decided to head there, and bought a ticket on the MV Evangelistas, a rollon-rolloff ferry. I was later, incidentally, to regret not going to Chaiten, as everyone I met who had gone there said that it was one of the most beautiful regions in Chile.

The office had told me to be at the ferry terminal by 9AM, and I was there right on time. There were about 50 people waiting for the Evangelistas, and more kept trickling in all the time. I started talking to some of the others, and discovered that the office had given out different sailing times to different people - e.g., while I had been told to show up 2 hours before a sailing time of 11AM; others had been told to show up 1 hour before a sailing time of 1PM, and still others had been told to show up 'a reasonable amount of time before' a sailing time of 3PM! Pretty amazing - in any event the boat left at 2:30PM, and I wondered, although I never found out, whether some poor souls had been given a sailing time of 5PM and therefore missed the boat completely ...

The Evangelistas could take 400 passengers, in 2 huge rooms of 200 seats each, plus a small number in cabins and berths. It was about half-full on this trip, with the 90% of the passengers being Chileans. In addition to the seating rooms, there was a (stand-up) snack bar, a couple of tables in a sheltered outside area, and lots of space on deck. If the boat had been full and travelling in bad weather (which makes the deck space unusable), it would have felt cramped; but since it was only half full and the weather was just about perfect, there was plenty of room to move around in.

The day was really nice, with lots of sun, not many clouds, and no rain. The scenery leaving Puerto Montt is pleasant (not really spectacular, though) and I lounged around on deck for most of the day, idly chatting to people and enjoying the sun and views. Among the people I met were Pam, an English girl who was working as a journalist in Chile, and Martha, an older American woman who was now a Peace Corps volunteer in Paraguay. Pam and Martha had both travelled around quite a bit in their respective countries, and had some interesting stories about what was 'really' happening in Chile and Paraguay, and the day passed pleasantly enough as I talked to them and others.

Sunday: The scenery was much more striking today, as the boat entered the maze of islands and narrow channels that surround Chacabuco. The weather was, if anything, even better than before, and I spent the morning sitting on deck, watching the scenery, chatting, and reading a book.

The boat arrived in Chacabuco harbor at around noon, and I headed down to pack my stuff and get ready to disembark. On my way down, I passed by Pam, who advised me not to be too rushed about things - she had taken this boat before, and thought it might be several hours yet before we were able to get off. This seemed unbelievable to me - I mean, we were in the harbor, and any US or European ferry in such a position would be unloading passengers within half an hour - but I should have listened to an old hand's wisdom, as it was in fact 4PM before we got off the boat. Some of the Chilean passengers were even more annoyed than I was at the delay, and for a while I thought we might have the beginnings of a small riot on the boat ... I should mention that Navimag, the company which ran both the Evangelistas and the Tierra del Fuego (see part III), was probably the most inefficient organization I dealt with in my 6 weeks in Chile. They did run some beautiful boat trips, though!

Once we got off, there was more hassle collecting luggage (a veritable mob scene, as 200 people crowded around the small desk for picking up checked baggage), and then more hassle when I finally arrived in Coyhaique, as most of the cheaper hotels seemed closed, full, or completely unacceptable. I

finally just shrugged my shoulders and checked into one of the town's fancier hotels - not something I normally do, but I was fed up with this annoying ending to a beautiful day, and in any case managed to negotiate a 50% reduction on the hotel's normal price. A little luxury once in a while isn't *really* a sin ...

Monday: I spent the morning wandering around Coyhaique. It's quite a nice little place (population of about 30,000), although in a rather odd location, on the side of a mountain (apparently because there is less wind there!). It was Christmas Eve, and there was a festive air about the town, as people did their last minute holiday shopping and otherwise got ready for the big day. I had originally intended to spend most of the day in the nearby countryside, but ended up just hanging around Coyhaique.

I had decided to cross into Argentina at Chile Chico, the southernmost border crossing with regular public transport. There is no road link between Coyhaique and Chile Chico - one must take a bus to Puerto Ibanez, and then catch a twice-weekly ferry across Lake Carrera, from Ibanez to Chile Chico. I got on an Ibanez-headed van (a `collectivo') at around 5PM, and said goodbye to Coyhaique.

The road from Coyaique to Puerto Ibanez is a fairly narrow and bumpy but well-graded dirt road, with a traffic volume of maybe 2 or 3 vehicles an hour - I suspect this makes it one of the busiest and best maintained roads in all of Aysen! We passed lots of `homestead'-looking farms (ramshackle wooden buildings with lots of miscellaneous junk scattered around), as well as occasional people on horseback - real frontier country, I guess! The countryside was a bit disappointing, though, as it was a lot drier and less forested than the coastal land I had scene from the Evangelistas. I later found out that this is because the Andes in Patagonia are actually submerged, and run along the coast and nearby islands (i.e., all the pretty islands I had seen were actually Andean mountain tops), so inland points like Ibanez are on the dry pampa-like eastern side of the Andes, instead of the lush forested western side. The moral is, if you want to see forests and the like in Patagonia, you pretty much have to stay on the coast.

Anyways, we arrived at Ibanez at around 8PM (fortunately, the sun sets pretty late in Patagonia in December), and, after checking into the town's only open hotel, I started wandering around. I discovered a rodeo stadium by the lake shore (nothing scheduled - darn!), watched people bring their horses to the lake to water them (I've heard the phrase `you can bring a horse to water but you can't make him drink' many times, but this was the first time I had actually seen it happen), and then headed back to the hotel. It was Christmas Eve and I was wondering if anything special would be happening, but all I saw was a smallish Christmas tree in one corner of the hotel's dining room.

Tuesday: I woke up in the morning, and set out to explore Ibanez and its surroundings.

Puerto Ibanez is situated on Lake Carrera, the second biggest lake in South America (after Lake Titicaca). There are various other settlements scattered around the lake, some of them not reachable by road (except by crossing into Argentina, which is a bureaucratic nightmare for cargo trucks), and a boat, the Pilchero, regularly carries supplies and passengers from Ibanez to the other settlements. The countryside is best described as hilly scrub - dry, but not flat - and the dominating feature is the lake itself, with its incredible shades of blue and green. The town itself has about 1500 inhabitants, spread around a cove in the lake.

I spent most of the day wandering in the nearby countryside. I found a nice spot on the lake from which the town was invisible, and sat there for an hour or two, reading a book. I've always been fascinated by the idea of a frontier, of men taming and settling new lands, and with no signs of civilization or the hand of man visible from my lakeside spot, I could pretend I was a true pioneer ...

Back in town, I hung out with some of the other tourists at the hotel, and took a look around Ibanez itself. It had a nice frontier flavor, with its rodeo stadium, horses tied up besides houses, beat-up pickup trucks, 4WD jeeps, and general feeling of isolation. It was quiet, of course, since it was Christmas day, but there was a happy air to the place as all the kids played with their new toys. In my hotel, the owner's two daughters proudly

showed off their new bicycle and dollhouse to friends and tourists alike, and we all made admiring noises about how wonderful they were.

The area was supposed to be a paradise for fishermen, with great fishing rivers just a few miles from town. I'm not into fishing myself, but some of the other tourists were, and they came back after an hour with a good 10 or 20 fish, plus berries the 'womenfolk' had gathered while the men fished (back to caveman days, I guess - the men hunt and fish while the women gather!). They invited the rest of us to share their bounty, and we had a marvelous dinner of fresh-caught fish and cooked berries spread on bread - if this is living off the land, I decided, I'm all for it!

Wednesday: The boat for Chile Chico was due to leave at 11AM, so I had a lazy morning nibbling on left-over fish and berries, and then said goodbye to the fishing/berry-gathering group, and walked to the town's dock. The Pilchero was a small boat, and on this trip only carried one truck, a handful of cars, and 20-30 foot passengers. We set off exactly on schedule, and I really enjoyed the two and a half hour lake crossing to Chile Chico. The lake in particular was quite a sight with its constantly changing colors, and the brown hills made a nice contrast to the lake's blues and greens. I chatted to some Chileans who were also heading into Argentina from Chile Chico (they worked in an Argentinian mining town), and they assured me that transport across the border was no problem.

We arrived in Chile Chico at around 1:30PM, and I thought "this must be the *real* frontier"! The cars were more beat-up, the horses more numerous, and the houses more 'frontier-looking', in some sense. The wind was whistling through the air, and I half-expected to see tumbleweeds rolling around men armed with six-shooters ...

I probably should have hung around Chile Chico longer, but I was nervous about transport, so I decided to head across to Argentina as soon as possible. Chile Chico is only about 10 km from the Argentinian town of Los Antiguos, and I caught a colectivo across the border after wandering around town for an hour or two. My guidebook had said the colectivos had to drive across a nearby river at a ford, which I was looking forward to, but unfortunately a bridge had built a few months before. Rats - progress strikes again.

Los Antiguos was a real shock. I hope I have succeeded in giving the reader a feel for the remoteness and frontier-like atmosphere of Aysen, where, for example, getting to towns like Chile Chico requires first taking a boat to Chacabuco, then driving for several hours along narrow dirt roads, and then catching a small twice-weekly ferry boat across a lake. Los Antiguos, in contrast, felt like a modern little exurban town - the cars were newish, not a single horse could be seen on the streets, there were Greenpeace posters in the tourist office, and a paved road went all the way from Los Antiguos to Buenos Aires. Civilization, in short. Los Antiguos and Chile Chico were separated by 10km in space and at least 100 years in time ...

Thursday, Friday: Prices in Argentina were quite high, due to an overvalued currency, so I decided to pass through and return to Chile as quickly as possible. Besides being overvalued, the Argentinian Austral was also incredibly unstable - on Thursday, for example, it was worth A5200/dollar at 9AM, A5700/dollar at 2PM, and A5500/dollar at 5PM. A few weeks after I left, it fell to A9000/dollar - and for all I know, it then climbed back to A4000/dollar (I stopped following it after it reached A9000, but such a fall followed by a rise to an even greater value had occurred over the summer). No doubt adventurous souls could make (or lose) a fortune by buying and selling australs at the proper moment, but I much preferred the stability of Chile, where today's exchange rate was a good predictor of tomorrow's!

At any rate, Thursday was one of the more boring ones of my trip, as I took a 16 hour bus ride through the pampas from Los Antiguos to the town of Rio Gallegos. The Argentinian pampas are a huge area of scrub ranchland, mostly dry and flat, and get a bit boring after an hour or so - 16 hours is definitely a bit much! The people were very friendly, though, and when we arrived in Rio Gallegos one of the other passengers insisted on showing me around the town and then helping me find a cheap hotel.

On Friday, I wandered around Rio Gallegos a bit in the morning. It felt more Western than the towns I had seen in Chile, with lots of boutiques and delicatessens selling fancy bits and pieces. I really wanted to return

to Chile, though, so I caught an afternoon bus to Punta Arenas, the major city of Chilean Patagonia, and felt my spirits lift when I crossed the border back into Chile, and caught my first glimpse of the Straits of Magellan.

Postscript: Of all the places I visited in South America, Aysen is the one I would most like to return to. It's not as spectacularly beautiful as some of the other parts of Chile, but nowhere else have I felt so close to a frontier, to an area where men are still settling and taming the land. I guess I've always harbored a secret desire to be a pioneer on the frontier, so maybe one of these days I'll forget all the computer nonsense and go stake out a homestead in Aysen ...

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Part III: Patagonia: The Voyage of the Tierra del Fuego

Geographical Context: Patagonia is the southernmost region of South America, and includes bits of both Argentina and Chile. The Argentine part is mostly pampas, i.e., endless windswept plains largely populated by ranchers (gauchos). The Chilean part, in contrast, consists of a forested fjord/island region much like the coast of Norway. There is no road that traverses all of Chilean Patagonia, but there is a boat, the MV Tierra del Fuego, which transports passengers and trucks the length of the region, from Puerto Montt (in the Chilean heartland) to Puerto Natales, 200km north of the Straits of Magellan. The trip is supposed to take three days, but can take longer if the weather or tides are bad.

Thursday: After leaving Aysen, I had made my way to Magallanes, the southernmost region of Chile, which includes the Straits of Magellan and the Chilean side of Tierra del Fuego. Magallanes is the kind of place one can easily spend weeks in, and indeed I spent almost two weeks there, mostly hanging around Punta Arenas (the capital of the region, and full of very friendly people), Puerto Natales (a smaller town north of Punta Arenas, in a spectacular setting on the 'Gulf of Last Hope'), and the Torres del Paine national park (just south of the Patagonian icecap, with fantastic views of glaciers and mountains). When I finally decided it was time to head back north, I knew, of course, that I would have to take the boat, so I could get a proper penguin's-eye view of Patagonia.

The Tierra del Fuego was leaving early (5AM) Friday morning on its north-bound Puerto-Natales -> Puerto-Montt trip, and we were asked to board the boat the night before. I would rather have spent the night on shore, but decided to play it safe and stick to the rules, since alternative transport out of Patagonia was very difficult to arrange (all buses, planes, and future sailings of the Tierra del Fuego were fully booked weeks in advance), and I needed to catch an international flight from Santiago in a week and a half.

The main topic of conversation as we waited to get on board was the Tierra del Fuego's encounter with a rock 3 weeks ago, which (according to rumor) left a 40-foot gash in the hull and (verifiable fact) had forced the boat to spend a week in Puerto Natales being repaired. There are lots of narrow rock-filled channels around Puerto Natales, and the then-captain (now unemployed) had decided to go through one of these without waiting for high tide (rumor claimed he was under management pressure to make up lost time). No one had been hurt, but we all knew that if the boat had a more serious accident and sank, we wouldn't last long in the ice-cold Patagonian waters ...

The Tierra del Fuego had four kinds of accommodation - cabins, bunks, class A seats, and class B seats. I never saw a cabin but heard they were quite nice. Bunks were quite comfortable bunkbeds in reasonably-sized rooms (3 bunks to a room), class A seats were reclining seats in a small compartment (13 seats) with a view, and class B seats were reclining seats in a large 'container' (80 seats) on the truck deck. The class B container was next to some trucks carrying sheep, cattle, and other animals, so those of us fortunate fortunate enough to have better seats cracked innumerable jokes about how the ship's livestock section included a 'human pen'. Besides the sleeping areas, the only indoors space available to non-cabin passengers was the dining room - there were none of the lounges, snack bars, TV rooms, shops, etc that are found

in most US or European ferries.

I had been unable to get a bunk, since they were mostly reserved for truck drivers, and had instead settled for a class A seat. When I got on the boat I quickly unrolled my sleeping bag on a choice bit of floor space, as I prefer sleeping on the floor to sleeping in a chair. Many other people, particularly in class B, had the same idea, and some brave rain-loving souls even staked out semi-sheltered spots on deck to sleep in. Some of these hardy souls were a bit taken aback, though, when they discovered that while they had been sleeping on deck, their seats had been sold to people on the stand-by list!

Friday: I didn't get much sleep (partly due to a *loud* snorer in my compartment), but the beautiful scenery soon revived me. The boat was meandering through various channels, many of them narrow (and rock-filled!), on its way to the main North-South channel. I had once taken a boat trip on the coast of Norway, and the scenery here reminded me of that - narrow channels, lots of forested islands, mountains plunging directly into the sea. The main difference was that while most of the Norwegian coast is settled, and every little valley and island has its Viking history, the Patagonian islands are uninhabited except for a few fishing villages. A true wilderness area, in other words, one of the few places on this globe that has not yet been 'exploited' by man. As I watched the islands go by, I wondered what it would be like to jump overboard (in a wet suit, of course), swim to a random island, and live a Robinson Crusoe type life, completely out-of-touch with the rest of the human race. I talked a bit to a nun and a teenage girl who were going to a religious retreat on one of the islands, and I half-thought of making an instant conversion to Catholicism and then asking if I could join them ...

I spent a few hours around lunchtime talking to Jim and Linda, a couple who were returning to Britain after a job in Tuvalu, a South Pacific island nation. They laughed when I told them I wanted to stay on one of the islands, and said that they had spent two years on a remote island whose only contact with the outside world was a monthly ferry, and they were looking forward to being in a place that had bookstores, telephones, and an occasional new face that they hadn't seen before!

The weather during the day was typical Patagonian - clouds with occasional bursts of sun, frequent bursts of rain, and odd bursts of hail. Gray, in other words. Kind of like Scotland, except that the rain, when it came, was a lot stronger than Scottish drizzles. The human passengers could at least go inside, but the livestock, sitting in their open trucks on the open truck deck, had to suffer through the rain and hail. When we stood on deck we could see the animals shivering and huddling together, and sometimes hear their pitiful bleating when the weather got really nasty. It seemed crazy to me to subject animals to this kind of treatment - if nothing else, sick or dead animals are presumably worth a lot less than healthy ones - but it seemed to be standard practice on the Tierra del Fuego.

Saturday: The snoring wasn't so bad this night (or maybe I was just getting used to it), so I actually got some sleep before waking up at 5AM to see Puerto Eden, the boat's only stop between Puerto Natales and Puerto Montt. Puerto Eden has about 300 souls or so, and is the biggest village on any of the islands. The boat did not dock, but just stopped in the middle of the channel while small boats came out from Puerto Eden to load and unload cargo and passengers. It was quite fun to watch, especially because some of the Puerto Edenians were Indians, the last remaining descendants of some of the fierce tribes that once ruled Patagonia. I waved good-bye to the nun and her teen-age charge as they got off the boat, and then went back to sleep.

When I got up, I discovered that the boat hadn't budged - it was still sitting in the channel off of Puerto Eden, and remained there until 12 noon. Apparently we had to wait for a high tide in some channel (I suspect the captain was being extra-cautious because of the recent accident). I asked some people if it was possible to go ashore and explore Puerto Eden, but the small boats had all left, and there didn't seem to be any other way to leave the Tierra del Fuego. It was a nice day, though (i.e. occasional drizzles but no heavy rain, and even a bit of sun now and then), so I hung around on deck with various other tourists. After the boat started moving, it hit a windy patch and we all stood around on deck and tried to see how far we could lean into the wind without falling over.

I had lunch with some of the Chilean truck drivers, and they clearly

thought (although they didn't quite say so) that all of us Western tourists were crazy. Why on earth were we paying \$100 to spend 3 days on a boat, when a bus to Puerto Montt (through Argentina) cost \$50 and only took 36 hours? Was there some odd element in Western culture which made us enjoy spending 4 nights sleeping in a chair? A difficult question to answer ... I should mention that, excluding the truck drivers, 90% of the passengers were foreign tourists, and the handful of Chileans generally had good reasons for not taking the bus (e.g., they were moving house and needed to take a trailer full of furniture).

Lunch, by the way, consisted partly of a stew with rather odd chewy bits of material in it. It wasn't bad, just strange, but I made the mistake of asking one of the truck drivers what it was. When he responded "cow stomach", I gulped and pushed the bowl aside, much to the amusement of my companions. Sometimes its better not to know ...

I spent the afternoon hanging around with Susan, a fellow traveller I had met in Puerto Natales. Susan and I had roughly equal competence at Spanish (not fluent by any means, but able to converse with people if we could convince them to slow down and speak clearly), and we had fun trying to figure out a poem in one of Susan's books. We eventually decided it was too difficult and asked a Chilean to explain it to us, but he told us that he couldn't understand the poem either! I told Susan afterwards that I had decided to stick to non-fiction in the future ...

In the evening, the boat entered the dreaded and aptly named "Gulf of Sorrow" (Golfo de Pena), the only true open-ocean part of the trip. The crew passed out sea-sickness bags to the tourists, and I headed up to my favorite semi-sheltered spot on deck (it was, of course, raining heavily again). Juan, a Chilean oil engineer from Punta Arenas, had discovered the same spot, and we sat and talked about politics as we watched the boat go crashing through the waves. Chile had just recently made a transition from dictatorship to democracy, and Juan was saying that although he didn't actually approve of Pinochet, the ex-dictator, he had to admit that the man had done gone things for the economy. I'd heard quite a few other Chileans make similar remarks, and it set me to wondering - how do you evaluate a bloody tyrant who overthrew a democratically-elected government and killed and tortured hundreds of political prisoners, but who also saved his country from economic chaos and raised the living standards of millions? In college philosophy class I would have said the killings outweighed any economic gain, but now I'm less sure, since the vast majority of people I've met in my various wanderings around the Third World seem to care much more about economic well-being than about politics.

It's absolutely clear, though, that however one evaluates Pinochet's career as dictator, he was certainly acting badly at the time of my trip to Chile - making numerous veiled and not-so veiled threats of staging another coup (especially when corruption investigations started getting too close to him), and generally causing lots of unnecessary problems for the fledging democratic government (which, I should add, consisted of some of the most decent, capable, and honest politicians that I saw in any Latin American country).

Enough politics. I must say that this moment of the trip is the one that most clearly sticks in my mind. My memories of gliding through beautiful sun-lit channels are already starting to fade, but I can still vividly recall seeing the twin smokestacks of the Tierra del Fuego silhouetted against the crashing waves as the ship fought its way through the misnamed 'Pacific' ocean, while Juan and I kept up a deep political discussion as we huddled for shelter from the rain and hail. I could really feel the boat as a little self-contained world afloat in a hostile sea, trying to battle its way through the elements to safety ...

Sunday: I wasn't too badly affected by the boat's rocking, but I heard lots of running in the hallways (presumably to the toilets) at night, so I assume the seasickness bags saw a bit of use. By breakfast time the water was getting a bit calmer, but I still noticed that far fewer people than usual had come down for the meal ...

The weather improved somewhat, and we spent a few glorious sunny hours sailing through inter-island channels. Some dolphins kept us company for a bit, and the waters were full of ducks, the skies full of birds, and the islands full of trees and mountains. We waved at a few fishing boats in the distance, and at one container ship that passed pretty close by. This is the part of the trip that the tourist brochures all talk about, I'm sure,

although, as I said above, it's not the part that most sticks in my memory.

I spent the day, as usual, drifting around the boat chatting to the various people I had met. As I grow older I seem to be doing more of my travelling on boats (always ferries - I've never yet found a cruise that both goes somewhere interesting and is within my price range). I guess I really enjoy the atmosphere; plenty of room to move around in, plenty of opportunities to hang around and meet people, nice scenery by and large, and more 'atmosphere' than is usually found in buses, trains, or planes.

I spent the evening talking with my friend Susan and with Carlos, an engineer from Spain (Susan and I had once again combined forces to achieve better Spanish fluency). Carlos was interesting to talk to because he knew a great deal about Patagonia and its history, but he also complained a lot about the trip. I guess that while the backpackers (such as myself) had more or less known what to expect, and in any case were used to roughing it, Carlos was a well-off professional, and did not appreciate spending four nights in a chair. I gathered that he had only seen glossy tourist pamphlets before signing up for the trip, and had been shocked when he saw what living conditions were like. So, a warning to readers - I took quite a few boat trips in Chile, and while they were all beautiful, they were also all very primitive accommodation- and facility- wise, except for passengers in cabins. Be warned, and get a cabin unless you're used to roughing it.

Day 4: The last day of the trip. We arrived at Puerto Montt harbor at about 9AM, but once again had to wait a few hours for high tide, and didn't actually dock until noon. I felt kind of funny as I walked off the boat. On the one hand, I was certainly looking forward to days without rain and nights spent on a bed. But on the other hand, I remembered all the magic moments of the trip - watching the boat battle through the South Pacific waves, looking for birds and dolphins in the sunlit inter-island channels, and just hanging around and talking to Susan, Linda, Jim, Carlos, Juan, and all the other people I had met on the trip - and I knew that the voyage of the Tierra del Fuego was going to be one of the most unforgettable experiences of my trip to South America.

Postscript: I hope I have succeeded in giving the reader a feel for the voyage of the Tierra del Fuego - the most uncomfortable, but also the most beautiful, boat trip I have ever taken. For anyone who is tempted to do the same trip, I should say that 1990/91 was the Tierra del Fuego's last season in Patagonia. The boat has been sold, and, according to rumor, will shortly appear somewhere in Italy. The Puerto Natales - Puerto Montt run will be taken over by a new, and (so I have been assured) better equipped boat. But if anyone happens to go to Italy and see a medium-sized RO/RO ferry with two smokestacks, an open truck deck, minimal facilities, and a few scars on its hull from Patagonian rocks, please let me know - I wouldn't mind riding on the Tierra del Fuego one last time ...

Travel Summary

Travel in Chile is quite easy by Third-World standards. You can drink the water and eat the food without worrying about getting sick (the most common dietary problem among tourists seemed to be 'fruit overdose' - when Americans and Europeans realized how incredibly cheap and good fruit was in Chile, they sometimes tended to eat just a bit too much. As I discovered, eating a kilo of cherries or grapes in half an hour is *not* advisable, no matter how good they taste!). Theft and violent crime is rare, and most travel services are reasonably efficient. Most of the population is of European descent, so the tourist can 'blend in', and does not stick out out of a crowd. Prices are cheap by Western standards (although not as cheap as in the countries in the northern half of the continent), and I ended up spending about \$25/day, not counting international airfare. Many other backpackers did fine on \$15/day. Fluent English speakers are not common, but many people in the tourist business do speak a few words (I strongly recommend trying to learn some Spanish, though, as your trip is likely to be much more interesting if you can talk to locals, read newspapers, etc).

Chile is not for everyone. If you want to visit exotic peoples with exotic

cultures in exotics surroundings, you'd be much better off going to Central America or the Andean countries (Bolivia, Ecuador, Peru); if your interest is in beautiful tropical beaches, head for someplace near the Carribbean (e.g. Mexico or Venezuela). But if you're like me and have always most loved remote unpopulated areas with snow-capped mountains, lakes, forests, and fjords, then go to Chile, and I only hope that you fall in love with the country as much as I did.