

**Chili? In Chile?
When It's Chilly? :
James Nicol**



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Chili?

In Chile?

When It's Chilly?



Andrew has always loved chili—especially in winter, when it’s, well, chilly. So, years ago, when he learned there was actually a country called *Chile*, he was delighted. “Perfect,” he said. “Let’s go eat chili—in Chile—when it’s chilly.” He’s repeated that line many, many times, always with a chuckle. Nothing at all silly about that – is there?

So, on a whim—well, not *entirely* a whim—Andrew and I are off to do just that: eat chili, in Chile, when it’s chilly.

To be fair, it wasn’t completely spontaneous. Elaine and her friend Laura had been planning a trip to the UK since the start of the year. The plan was for Andrew and me to stay home and

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mind the dogs. Or so she thought. But, as usual, my mind wandered to other options. That long-considered Chile trip came to mind. “Why not?” I thought. One thing led to another, plans were quietly made, and here we are.



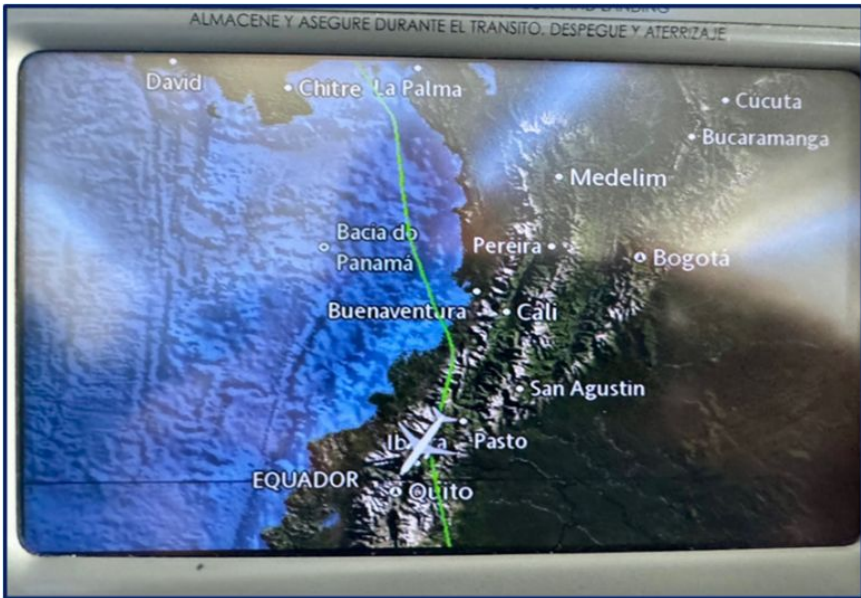
The timing worked out rather well. We drove Elaine and Laura up to Chicago O’Hare Airport and, after dropping them off, checked into a nearby hotel for the night. A bit of bowling and Buffalo Wild Wings in Chicago would’ve been enough of an adventure for most. But, as Andrew said, that was just the warm-up.

Very early the next morning, we were back at O’Hare ourselves, boarding a flight to Panama City on Copa Airlines—the Panamanian national carrier. I hadn’t heard of it before and, admittedly, I was a bit wary. A budget-friendly airline from a “developing” country flying us such a long way? But my concern quickly faded. Copa, a Star Alliance member, turned out to be excellent: brand-new 767s, attentive (maybe a little *too* attentive) staff, and impressive efficiency. A thoroughly pleasant experience.

After five smooth hours, we landed in Panama City—a place I'd never really thought much about, beyond its famous canal. But after some light reading and chatting with the crew, I realized Panama might be worth exploring in future. It's modern, safe, culturally rich, and boasts beautiful beaches on both its Caribbean and Pacific coasts. The only real drawback? It's in the deep tropics—hot all year round. True to that, during our three-hour layover, a proper tropical storm blew through—an incredible sound and light show. I hadn't factored that into our travel plans, knowing how much Andrew dislikes bad weather. He was brave, though clearly unsettled, and eager to get on our next flight and leave the storm behind.

Flying in tropical regions often means turbulence, and this flight didn't disappoint. The six-hour journey to Santiago took us directly along the spine of the Andes, and the first 30 minutes were a white-knuckle rollercoaster ride through heavy clouds and unstable air. Once we broke through and leveled out, the rest of the flight was smooth.

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Crossing into the Southern Hemisphere brought with it a few curiosities. I attempted to test the theory that water spins down the plughole in the opposite direction south of the equator—but, perhaps surprisingly, discovered that doesn't work at 30,000 feet. The seasons, of course, are flipped: we were leaving northern autumn for southern spring. It will be odd but lovely to see cherry blossoms in September. One thing I truly didn't expect, though, was seeing the sun high in the *northern* sky at midday. It's a strange, disorienting feeling.

With the turbulence behind us, the cabin lights dimmed and the quiet lull of a long-haul flight settled in. I drifted in and out of sleep, sipped on an endless glass of Malbec, watched a movie, wrote a little. Andrew, the best travelling companion imaginable,

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read and watched films beside me.



About four hours into the flight, I noticed Andrew was uncomfortable—grimacing in pain. This had been my biggest worry: the two of us travelling alone, and something going wrong. From years of experience I quickly diagnosed the problem. I asked if he needed the bathroom. He did—but he wouldn't go because the seatbelt sign was on. [Later, a flight attendant explained that the seatbelt sign is kept on for the entire flight along the Andes route, just in case.] Despite my encouragement, Andrew refused to move.

In desperation, I pressed the call button. A flight attendant arrived quickly. At my prompting, he assured Andrew it was perfectly fine to use the restroom, even with the sign still on. Relieved, Andrew finally went. I followed discreetly, just to make sure he was all right.

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The flight attendant—his name was Daniel—was visibly moved. He took my hand and, in broken English, explained that his day job was teaching philosophy at a university in Panama. As part of his academic work, he had studied the unique bond between parents and special children, which he described as “like no other, yet so natural, and normal”. Unbeknownst to me, he had observed that bond between Andrew and me throughout the flight, and he was effusive in his praise. He spoke with such sincerity and emotion, I was taken aback.

Of course, Elaine and I know what we have. After all these years, it's simply part of life. We are proud of Andrew, of our daughters, and of the family we've built. But when Daniel asked—no, *insisted*—on giving me a hug, tears were shed.

Back in my seat, in the quiet glow of the cabin, flying through the night sky, I reflected on how the daft notion of eating chilli in Chile when it's chilly—has become something much more profound. These next nine days, I'm certain, will be filled with emotion, meaning, and moments that affirm the very bond Daniel so beautifully recognized.

Over the Hills. Far Away



Although the journey was, for the most part, uneventful, we arrived at our hotel utterly exhausted and collapsed straight into bed—shamefully, without even showering off the dust of the road.

We slept soundly, though surprisingly briefly, given that we were still in the same time zone. It actually took me quite a while during my earlier dealings with Chile to fully grasp that the country lies almost directly south of the eastern United States. I had always imagined it much further west. The upside of this geographical quirk, of course, is that there's no jetlag. It's an odd feeling. Usually, when I travel long haul, I'm heading far east or west and spend several days waking at strange hours as my body adjusts. But not this time.

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We rose early, refreshed and full of anticipation for our first day in Santiago. Throwing back the curtains, we were greeted by an unseasonably bright, warm, sunny day. The city's high-rises sparkled against the awe-inspiring backdrop of the Andes, which, to our surprise, were far closer than expected. In Santiago, the mountains are omnipresent—you feel their presence no matter where you are in the city.

Breakfast quickly became one of the highlights of our three-day stay. The food itself was solid—typical hotel buffet fare; the setting was unforgettable, with those towering mountains always in view. Yet it wasn't the food or scenery that made the biggest impression; it was the staff.

Over the years, I've developed a kind of sixth sense for spotting people who have real experience interacting with individuals like Andrew—perhaps through a close friend or family member. Juan Pablo and Sebastián were two such people. They immediately took a shine to Andrew, checking in on him every few minutes to see if he needed anything. Over the course of half an hour, they brought him no fewer than three full breakfasts: sausage, bacon and eggs; French toast; and pancakes. Even they seemed a little surprised at how much my man could put away. Eventually, I had to call a halt—because Andrew would have just kept going!

In any case, the sights weren't going to see themselves!

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Our mission—one we gladly accepted—was to visit Cerro San Cristóbal, the hill rising 800 meters above sea level, crowned by the statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary. We'd been told this was the best place to start our time in Santiago, offering the most spectacular views of the city and the Andes beyond.

We *could* have walked (lol—who am I kidding? Some people could... but not us!), or taken the cable car. But we chose the funicular railway. Mostly because I like saying the word *funicular*.



Before boarding the funicular, we began what I hope will become a daily ritual for this trip: tracking down a proper espresso, in true Latin American style. We found a small coffee shop near the funicular station. The owner, a Brazilian-Chilean with excellent English, welcomed us warmly. We sat at the counter chatting with him about Chile, Brazil, and our visit. It was such a pleasant, unhurried way to start the day.

A silly little moment stuck with me: during our conversation, the owner poured me a glass of water and asked, “With gas or

without?”

“Without,” I replied.

Then he asked me what the English word was for *water with gas*.

Total brain freeze. I just couldn't think of it.

After about a minute of floundering, *his nibs*—sitting beside me scrolling through his phone, not even looking up—pipes up:

“Sparkling.”

We laughed. Diego, the owner, was especially kind to Andrew.

Soon after, we made our way to the funicular station. I took a moment to consider the thin steel cable that was about to haul us up the mountainside. 2025 marks the funicular's 100th anniversary and, as far as I know, there's never been an accident. Why would *today* be the day? Shaking off the thought—and shaking my head again, knowing full well Elaine wouldn't have come within a mile of the thing—we stepped aboard. The gate slammed shut, and off we went.

As with the thousands of rides before ours, it was uneventful—though perhaps less terrifying than expected. That is, until the final 100 yards, where the incline went near vertical and gave me a moment's pause. The highlight, though, was the enthusiastic whooping and hollering exchanged with the

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passengers of the other funicular as it passed us on the way down.



The reward at the top was more than worth it. We emerged onto a high terrace with seemingly infinite views stretching across the city and out to the mountains beyond. It was spectacular. Until that moment, I hadn't realized just how vast Santiago is—it sprawls endlessly in all directions.

My only sadness? At that altitude, we were above the red-brown haze of pollution that blankets the city. You don't notice it when you're in it, but from up here, it was glaringly visible. It makes you wonder about the long-term health effects on the people who live under it every day.

Once we emerged from our initial awe at the view, we turned to see that while the funicular had brought us most of the way up, we were still only about two-thirds of the way to the summit. Were we really going to climb all those steps?

Of course we were.

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It took us a while—and several breath-catching stops—but we made it. It's one of life's mysteries as you get older. Just recently, I cycled 437 miles across Iowa in 100°F heat without much distress. A few hundred steps up a hillside and I was completely winded.



I felt truly blessed when we finally reached the feet of the Blessed Virgin. We sat there in her shade for half an hour, resting and soaking in the stunning panorama of the city below and the mountains beyond.

Then it was time to descend to start the descent back into the city—sadly, beneath that ever-present blanket of smog.

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For a good ten minutes, I struggled—unsuccessfully—to operate the funicular ticket machine, unable to locate the ticket office. I laughed at my own incompetence when someone finally pointed out that the (admittedly small) office was directly behind the machine. Hidden in plain sight! Tickets in hand, we eventually made our way back down on the funicular.

ChatGPT—an amazing, if troubling, tool—had created our three-day itinerary in Santiago and recommended a typical Chilean taverna for lunch. We were hopeful it might finally be the place where we'd find that elusive chili we'd been searching for.

Unfortunately, we never managed to locate the taverna. Instead, we found ourselves in the middle of a large city-center shopping mall. Oddly, it felt both entirely familiar and strangely foreign at the same time. Many of the shops were recognizable, the energy and bustle very much like any mall back home—but of course, everything was infused with Chilean culture. I found myself intrigued by every little shop and side stall. What's ordinary to the locals was fascinating and new to me.



We even found a wool shop for Elaine. She asked me to bring her some. But I know my limits!

I kept especially close to Andrew in the crowd—I'm terrified of losing him in such busy places!

Though the ChatGPT-recommended taverna remained out of reach, we eventually ended up in the basement of the mall, in a bustling Chilean restaurant clearly popular with locals. Not a word of English was spoken—perfect. With the help of Google Translate (a miracle of modern technology that deserves its own story), we studied the Spanish menu and placed our order with the Spanish-speaking server.

It turned out to be a thoroughly enjoyable experience—being so completely immersed in the ordinary, everyday life of the wonderful people of Santiago.

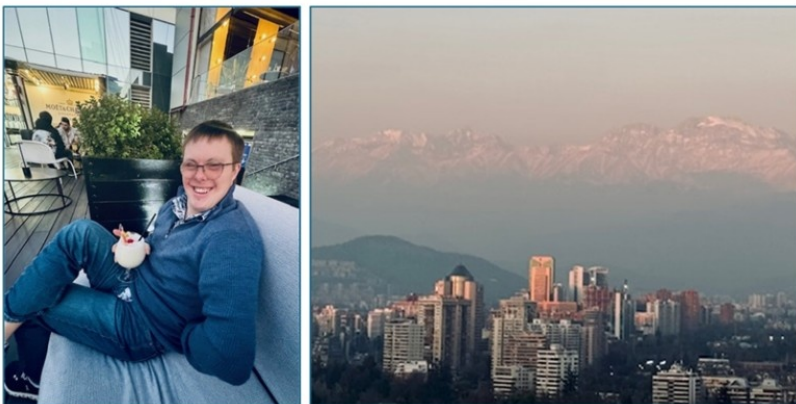
Tired from all our exertions—and with so much already accomplished in just our first half-day in Chile—we made our

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way back to the hotel for a well-earned nap. Thankfully, I'd set an alarm for 6:00 PM; otherwise, I could easily have slept straight through until morning.

I had splurged on our hotel, booking the W Marriott for our first few nights in Chile. It was far more upscale than anything I'd typically choose in the U.S., but given that we were alone and so far from home, I wanted to be sure of high-quality service until we found our bearings. The W did not disappoint. The staff were exceptionally attentive, and the facilities were top-notch—not least of all the rooftop bar, where we headed to catch the sunset.

While the sun itself, setting behind the hotel to the west, wasn't directly visible, what *was* visible was a kaleidoscope of colors projected onto the canvas of the Andes as the light faded. It was breathtaking. I sipped my glass of Malbec while Andrew enjoyed his usual vacation cocktail of choice: a piña colada. The boy is pure lush!



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Looking for a simple, traditional Chilean meal, we took the concierge's recommendation and booked a table at Pinpilinpausha—not a Spanish word, but Basque for “butterfly,” I was intrigued to learn. The restaurant was a cozy little spot just a few blocks from the hotel, with a quiet yet energetic ambiance.

I ordered the sea bass, but was slightly dismayed when the waiter returned shortly after to say they were out. However, he assured me they could prepare the exact same dish using *conger*. Conger? The massive eel from South American rivers? *That* conger? My stomach turned at the thought. But the waiter was insistent, even calling it his favorite “fish.” I wasn't convinced, but overcome by a desire to immerse myself in Chilean culture—and willing to overlook any digestive risk—I agreed to try it.

I'm happy to report that the conger was every bit as good as promised. A white, flaky fish with a robust flavor—nothing like the slimy, oily, bony eel I've sampled in other parts of the world.

We left the restaurant tired, full, and content with our first day in Santiago. A good omen, I hope, for the rest of the trip. We would sleep well tonight.

Still, the absence of any hint of *chili*—neither the spice, nor the dish—was ominous. It seems the quest to eat chili in Chile when it's chilly may prove more difficult than I had anticipated!

Men About Town



Tired from the previous day's exertions, we slept in and lingered over a leisurely breakfast before catching an Uber to the city center to explore Santiago's historic plazas and landmarks.

As we stepped out of the car into the Plaza de Armas, it became immediately clear that Day One had faked us out. The glorious sunshine and unseasonably warm weather apparently was unseasonable. Expecting another warm day, we'd foolishly left our coats at the hotel. *Big mistake.* It was freezing.

Still, despite the cold, the plaza buzzed with life. It was vibrant, chaotic, and slightly nerve-wracking. Several of the ever-attentive hotel staff had warned us to be cautious of pickpockets, so we stayed alert as we wandered through the crowds. The square was alive with circus performers, singers, and dancers in traditional costume—colorful, loud, and full of energy.

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In need of our usual mid-morning espresso fix, we found a pavement café on the edge of the square and settled in to watch the festivities, doing our best to stay warm.

Our server, speaking in broken English, insisted—almost demanded—that we try a traditional Chilean cake with our coffee. Honestly, she looked borderline offended when we hesitated. So, of course, we didn't decline.

The cake was absolutely delicious. It reminded me of a French *mille-feuille*, but with slightly less flaky pastry and packed with thick cream and a caramel-like filling called *manjar*. The portion was enormous, and the dessert so rich that I could only manage a bite or two before surrendering. I sat back, defeated, and pushed the plate away.

Almost instantly, a homeless man appeared beside our table and gestured toward the cake. I nodded, and without hesitation, he picked it up with his hand and strolled off down the street, munching happily as he went. I smiled—perhaps it was the most nourishment he'd get that day. Or perhaps he was a seasoned pro, dining well on the benevolence of tourists in the square.

We did make a positive step in the right direction to eating chili in Chile when it is chilly. It was certainly cold enough, and on the café table was a bottle of aji-crème; chili sauce. Perhaps all is not lost in our quest!

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It was too cold to linger long at the café, so we set off on a lap of the square, admiring the Spanish colonial architecture—most impressively, the **Metropolitan Cathedral**. We took a closer look at the Chilean dancers in traditional dress and the circus performers, who had now gathered under the central bandstand and were putting on a lively show for the growing crowd.

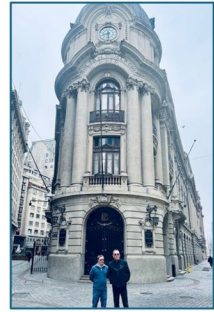
Hoping the walk would warm us up, we soon moved on, wandering down the narrow side streets of Santiago. Before long, we arrived at the **Plaza de la Constitución**, home to the seat of Chile's government.

Security around the plaza was tight, likely due to the upcoming **Independence Day** celebrations on September 18th. The country remains politically divided, even 50 years after the coup that overthrew socialist (or some would say communist) President

Salvador Allende, and brought General Pinochet to power.

We were warned to avoid the city center on the 18th, as things can get *rowdy*—a reminder that history here still runs deep and close to the surface.

By now, it was getting really cold, and we were seriously regretting our decision not to dress more warmly. We agreed to duck into the first café or bar we came across—anything to get out of the chill.



The place we found was called Binomios. In hindsight, something about the name probably should have raised a flag (I later asked Google Translate what it meant, but it couldn't offer a definition). No matter—we were just glad to be inside and warming up.

We had barely been seated a few minutes when I looked around and realized this probably wasn't quite our kind of place. The servers had unnaturally narrow waists, skirts that were far too

short, and proportions—both front and back—that defied anatomy. One glance at the all-male clientele confirmed my growing suspicion: this bar wasn't just a bar.

But by then, our beers had already arrived. And to be fair, despite the questionable setting, everyone was very pleasant—especially to Andrew. I think they realized my mistake.

Through Google Translate, we struck up a bit of conversation with our server, Albany. She (?) was from Venezuela and had been living in Chile for six years. She told us that life here was far better than what she had left behind. It seems that everywhere has its immigration challenges these days. In Chile, it's the influx of Venezuelans and Colombians, who—according to some locals—have brought with them rising crime, violence, and corruption. Still, I can only speak from personal experience, and despite the unexpected setting, our interaction with Albany was entirely positive.

After finishing our beers—accompanied by surprisingly delicious empanadas and quesadillas—we made a tactful but speedy exit and caught an Uber across the city to our next destination: an Independence Day festival in Parque Bicentenario.

The conversation in the back seat went something like this:

Me: Yes, that lady definitely had a VERY large bottom.

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Andrew: No one should have a bum like that!

Andrew (after a pause): Well, maybe Gloria from Madagascar.

Me: Gloria? What kind of creature is she again?

Andrew: A hippopotamus.

I should probably have chastised him for being unkind, but I couldn't stop laughing.

The Uber took us across the city, past neighborhoods and communities that, I imagined, reflected the everyday lives of ordinary Santiaguinos and Santiaguinas. It dropped us near **Bicentennial Park**, close to the **Municipalidad de Vitacura**—a striking government building with sharp geometric lines that made it look almost artificial in appearance.



As we'd been told, a major cultural festival was in full swing. However, it was ticketed entry only, and since it was getting later in the afternoon—and more importantly, still quite cold despite the sun's persistent efforts to break through the clouds—we decided not to go in. Instead, we followed the perimeter of the fairgrounds, occasionally glancing through the railings at the colorful and lively festivities beyond.

The path meandered through the park, past an annoyingly large image of *'Arry Kane* promoting Skechers—somewhat out of place in this setting. On one side was the fair; on the other, the intriguing **Río Mapocho**. I wasn't sure at first whether it was a natural river or a man-made drainage culvert. As it turns out, it's a bit of both.

The Mapocho is one of many rivers that drain the Andes into the Pacific, but its course has been shaped and channeled by the city's planners to control its flow. Reservoirs high in the mountains capture the snowmelt—the main source of Santiago's drinking water, irrigation, and even hydroelectric power—and release it as needed downstream. Since it was still spring, the reservoirs weren't yet full, and so the Mapocho was modest in size. Judging by the height of the channel walls, however, it must rage at times.

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I was also fascinated by the design of the man-made riverbed: thousands of uneven rocks embedded in the floor create constant turbulence, aerating the water to prevent stagnation. Simple, but effective!

So much packed into just two short days in Santiago. I'm surprised we still had the energy—but not wanting to miss a moment of this incredible adventure, we returned once more to the rooftop bar. Tonight, though, with cloud and mist blanketing the sky, there wasn't really a sunset to see. We huddled beneath a heater, sipping cocktails for a short while before venturing out again, this time to find an Irish bar.



Apparently lacking full commitment to our Chilean cultural immersion, we had Geo Bar, an Irish pub, on the radar as the most likely spot to catch some World Cup Qualifying football over the weekend. And it delivered—sort of. Frustratingly, the

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only game they didn't show highlights for was **Denmark vs. Scotland**, likely because it ended in a 0–0 draw and, well, had no highlights.

I did, however, catch **Nigeria beat Rwanda 1–0**—which was nice.

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The Out of Towners



He didn't ask, but nonetheless, I gave Andrew the morning off from our usual whirlwind of travel and exploration. I think he was quietly grateful for the break—happy to spend a few hours in our room watching Spanish-language TV and playing on his Nintendo. He'd been quite worried that his DS system wouldn't charge in Chile, but with the help of Google Translate, we managed to buy a compatible Chilean cable from a local tech store and—*voilà!*—he was back in business. *Phew!* This trip might have gone very differently without the occasional video game fix!

We enjoyed a final breakfast at the hotel, where the servers, **Juan Pablo** and **Sebastian**, continued to fuss over Andrew. I think they were genuinely surprised when I shook their hands and asked for a photo with them. They eagerly agreed but returned a few minutes later with unexpected parting gifts: Chilean lapel pins and a very nice bottle of local wine! I can't say enough about the

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friendliness and hospitality of the Chilean people.



To be honest, my decision to hole up in the hotel that morning was just as much for my own benefit. That afternoon, I was scheduled to pick up a rental car and drive to **Rancagua**, a town a couple of hours away, to meet my colleague Jason, who manages our Chilean business. Having observed Santiago's driving culture from the back seat of several Ubers, I wasn't exactly brimming with confidence. I consider myself a capable driver and have driven in many countries around the world—but I had the sense that this city could present some *particular* challenges.

After one last obligatory espresso and croissant, we set off for the Hertz office, about 15 minutes away. Thanks again to Google Translate (how *did* we ever travel without it?), the pickup process was surprisingly smooth—far easier than in some other countries.

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The car they gave me was a clean, white, compact SUV from a brand I didn't recognize. Curious, I asked the Hertz rep—via Google Translate—what it was. “JAEWOO,” she said, a Chinese brand.

I was impressed. When you hear “Chinese car,” it's easy to conjure images of the old *Moskvitch*, the notoriously awful Soviet vehicle. But this was nothing like that. The JAEWOO was sleek, modern, and *exceptionally* well-equipped. My colleague Jason would later tell me it sells for about half the price of a comparable Hyundai in Chile.

My head briefly filled with thoughts about global trade, Chinese innovation, and geopolitical shifts—but with a challenging drive ahead of me, I pushed those musings aside. With a deep breath, a touch of apprehension, and both hands firmly on the wheel, I plunged into the flow of Santiago traffic.



Fortunately, it was a Sunday afternoon, so I didn't have to contend with the typically hectic weekday traffic in the city. When driving in a new country, my game plan is simple: stick rigidly to the rules of the road, stay in the inside lane, and let the locals battle out their madness in the fast lanes. So, proceeding with the requisite caution, I successfully navigated Santiago's inner road network and soon found myself on the main highway heading south toward Rancagua.

I couldn't help but reflect that this road—the R5—is part of the legendary Pan-American Highway. Had I turned left instead, heading north, I'd be on a route that—if not for the 100-mile-wide Darién Gap—could take me all the way to Prudhoe Bay, Alaska, nearly 12,000 miles away. Continuing south for another 2,000 miles would bring me to Punta Arenas, deep in the Patagonian region of southern Chile. An almost continuous route spanning over 14,000 miles.

It made me wonder: why hasn't the Darién Gap been bridged yet? Surely, in this day and age, the delay isn't due to engineering limitations. More likely, it's the lawlessness—the bandits, drug cartels, and dense jungle—that still dominate the region.

I was relieved—and more than a little proud of myself—when, an hour and a half later and without incident, I arrived at the gas station Jason had chosen for our meeting. I've known him for

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many years, though the great distance between us means we rarely meet in person. His welcome was warm and sincere. He doesn't get many visitors from up north!

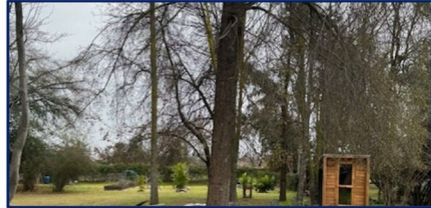
Jason began his international journey with the Peace Corps in Honduras in the early '90s. Coming from farming stock, he eventually found his way into our industry. Impressively, he moved to Chile in 2003 with nothing but a one-way ticket, some documentation about our products, and instructions to start a business in the region. Twenty-three years later, he's built a thriving company that employs 35 people and enjoys a level of credibility in the Chilean agricultural industry that's second to none. On top of that, he's a fine gentleman with a wonderful family, including three now-grown sons who are all highly accomplished. It was truly good to see him again.

We stayed at Jason's place for a couple of nights, and to be honest, it felt like a sanctuary. Navigating Santiago had been exciting, adventurous, and fun—but it was a real comfort to be in the company of someone who speaks the language, knows the country intimately, and could shoulder some of the responsibility.

We enjoyed his hospitality, from the simple pleasure of strolling through his garden and throwing sticks for his dog, Maple, to sharing a remarkably good Chilean-style barbecue. I'm no biker,

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but even I could appreciate the two motorcycles Jason is restoring: a 1931 Harley VL and a 1952 Harley K. He's a remarkably handy man.



For the first time in four days, I truly relaxed.

The Mountains Were Calling



I brought Jason a tube of chewing tobacco—apparently unavailable in Chile and to be kept hidden from his wife, Tiffany, who disapproves of the habit (and whom I sadly didn't get to meet, as she was back in the USA visiting family)—as well as a bottle of a very nice Dalmore single malt Scotch. The whisky was intended as a thank-you gift, but after we'd cleared away the barbecue and Andrew had slipped off to bed, Jason insisted we open it.

I was shocked—no, ashamed—to discover the next morning that we'd put away half the bottle! But that's what happens when you open a fine whisky and spend the night catching up with an old Scottish friend.

As a result, I was feeling a little fuzzy when the alarm buzzed at 6:00 a.m. But we had a big day ahead—the highlight of the trip,

in fact—so I hauled myself, and Andrew, out of bed to find Jason already in the kitchen, preparing bacon and eggs to fuel us for the adventure ahead. Today, the mountains were calling—Jason’s “happy place” high up in the Andes, where we’d fish and take in the spectacular scenery.

I should say, right off the bat, that I am not a fisherman. I’ve never caught a single fish. I’d barely know one end of a rod (or “pole,” as my American cousins would say) from the other. Nevertheless, I have to admit—I was completely thrilled to be heading to the hills with my boy.

Wheels up was precisely 6:30. We jumped into Jason’s truck and headed out, passing fields of cherry, kiwi, and grapes, all shrouded in the early morning mist. It was certainly chilly in Chile at that hour, and we were well layered against the cold.

About 45 minutes later, we made our first stop at a gas station near the town of Coya, where we met up with Victor—Jason’s number two in the business—who would not only serve as our fishing guide for the day but also as the “Grill Master.” A superpower we’d come to deeply appreciate as the day unfolded. We transferred into Victor’s truck, loading our gear into the bed. I found it curious how carefully he strapped everything down—bags, coolers, the lot—but didn’t think much of it at the time.



After a brief stop for refreshments in the pretty little town center, we began our ascent into the mountains.

The roads were good—at first. Plenty of hairpin bends as we traversed the steep mountainside, but the surface was smooth, luxurious blacktop. As the mist lifted, the beauty of the Andes came sharply into focus. I was surprised not to see snow on the peaks, considering it was early spring and surely it hadn't all melted yet. The guys quickly educated me: while these hills were higher than any point in the UK, they were just that—the foothills. The real snowcapped peaks lay further beyond.

We climbed higher and higher. I took note of the hydroelectric plants we passed and the intricate network of canals channeling water between them. What an incredible feat of engineering to construct such infrastructure in this rugged terrain.

Eventually, as we passed one hydroelectric pond, the road changed from smooth blacktop to unstable gravel. Victor seemed to relish the shift, swinging the truck around the bends with a kind of joyful confidence. Only on one or two hairpin turns did I glance nervously over the edge at the sheer drop below. The earth mound barriers would stop us from going over—wouldn't they?

By now, we'd been driving for about two hours, and the scenery had grown increasingly awe-inspiring. The promised snowcapped peaks now loomed above the foothills, and fast-flowing rivers cascaded alongside—and sometimes beneath us—via rickety wooden bridges.

Then, abruptly, the gravel “autobahn,” as Jason jokingly called it, came to an end. We were now on what could only generously be called a “goat track”—still technically a road, but riddled with so many potholes and undulations that the ride left us more shaken than the piña colada Andrew had enjoyed a couple of nights earlier.



I took a video from the back seat to capture just how violent the turbulence was. When Victor and Jason saw it later, they laughed out loud. They'd driven this route many times, but I don't think they truly realized how brutal it was until they saw it from that backseat perspective. It was, quite honestly, indescribable.

The bumpy, uneven road continued for another 45 minutes or so, shaking us to the core. We climbed ever higher, approaching—but never quite reaching—the snow line, inching closer to the sky with every turn. After crossing another perilous-looking wooden bridge spanning a raging torrent below, and navigating a few more tight hairpin bends, we finally entered “our” valley: the course of the Río Cortaderal, which we hoped would be teeming with freshwater trout.

Another mile or so along, we rounded a corner and were surprised to discover a neat, whitewashed house trimmed in green, nestled within an acre of carefully cultivated garden and flanked by a smooth gravel path. It seemed out of place. But we were told it was the local police station. Perhaps in name—but in practice, it functioned more as a mountain rescue outpost, there to assist anyone who found themselves in trouble in this remote terrain, and to enforce the fishing season schedule.

Don't tell anyone: but we were technically there out of season—but Jason knows the officers well; he repairs their trucks—and assured us it would be fine.

I later learned that Jason had even hired one of the officers from this post to work in his factory as head of security and regulatory compliance. Apparently, many Chilean police officers are leaving the force, frustrated that the rights of criminals often seem to outweigh their authority to enforce the law.

Another mile of bone-rattling track brought us to a dead end— a massive, sturdy green steel gate, trimmed with barbed wire. It marked the end of the road for us. Jason had hoped to borrow a key from a friendly officer to gain access to the headwaters of the river, but this time, that favor was a bridge too far.

Surprisingly, the road beyond the gate leads, just a few more miles on, to Noi Puma Lodge, the centerpiece of a vast

estate—many thousands of acres of high Andean wilderness—owned by a wealthy Chilean family. Despite its remoteness, the lodge is reputed to be quite luxurious. Friends of the elite make the journey there—likely by helicopter rather than the treacherous goat track—to fish the pristine headwaters.

I asked if they hunted as well—a natural pairing for a high-end lodge, at least in the U.S.—but was surprised to learn that there's virtually nothing to hunt up here. Perhaps the odd fox, or a rabbit lower down the valley. Apart from a few guanacos—relatives of the llama—in the northern regions of Chile, there's no large wild game like deer, and so hunting isn't popular in this part of the Andes.

And so, the big green gate marked our final stop. We pulled over at a passing point near the gate, tucked among a copse of trees that obscured the mountain views. Climbing out of the truck—still involuntarily trembling, like sailors trying to find their land legs after a week at sea—we began unloading our bags from the truck bed.

After the long, noisy, bone-rattling ride, the sudden shift in soundscape—from engine noise to the roar of the nearby river—was striking.

A narrow dirt path wound around the gate (Puma Lodge can bar vehicles, but by law cannot stop pedestrians), and we followed it,

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carrying our supplies about half a mile up the track. Eventually, we reached a break in the trees where a narrow footpath branched off toward the river.

As we stepped from the shadows of the trees, it was as if someone had drawn back a curtain to reveal a breathtaking canvas—mountains, meadow, and river, all bursting with color, light, and sound. I stood in awe, surrounded by a riot of shades, the roar of the water echoing off the cliffs, the towering, snow-tipped peaks of the Andes rising high above us to the east casting us in its long shadow as the sun inched its way westwards.



The sheer scale of it all was humbling—utterly spectacular.

I stood motionless for a while, simply taking in the raw beauty of nature. For a moment, I wondered how far away the nearest human being might be. Probably not as far as I imagined—perhaps just over the mountain in the next valley. But for all intents and purposes, the feeling of isolation, of

complete aloneness, was so strong it felt as if we were the only people on the planet. The water was crystal clear, the air unbelievably pure, and the silence—apart from the gentle tumble of the river—was so profound it seemed the earth had never been touched by human hands. The goodness of this place soaked me, and I was at peace.

That is, until I snapped out of my meditation and realized Jason and Victor—our hosts—were scurrying around, busy making camp. I was soon to learn that barbecuing is almost sacred to Chileans, deeply embedded in their culture. So, even before anyone thought about casting a line, the first order of business was to build a fire.

Jolting myself back into action, I helped gather rocks for the pit and kindling for the fire. Victor, “The Grill Master” took the lead in constructing it with great care and precision. Only when it was perfectly assembled did he strike a lighter and set it ablaze. Since it would take time for the coals to reach the ideal cooking temperature, we were promptly “shooed” away and told to go fish.

Which would have been fine—except, as I mentioned earlier, I barely know one end of a fishing rod from the other. Fortunately, Jason does and so, after he threaded two lines and attached the lures, we were ready. Although a complete novice, after a quick

demonstration I at least knew which end of the rod to hold, and I headed upstream to begin casting. I decided to let Jason teach Andrew rather than hover as his dad. Jason is a patient, tolerant man, and I knew he'd need every ounce of both if Andrew was to succeed in casting his line.

I wandered no more than a hundred yards, beyond a few trees, and as the last sounds from camp faded away, I suddenly felt completely and utterly alone in these towering, remote mountains. I don't think I've ever felt that isolated. Just me and—hopefully—some fat trout.

I made a few casts and, starting to feel slightly more confident, began to think: *If I were a fish, where would I be hiding?* Wherever they were, they certainly weren't in the spots I was pitching my line. That's when I realized that, of all the ingredients for a successful fishing trip, none is more important than a generous helping of patience.

After half an hour or so, I figured I should go check on Andrew. If there's one thing my boy has, it's patience. Patience to repeat himself until he's understood. Patience to keep trying until he gets it right. And in this case, patience to wait for a fish.

To be honest, he was struggling. He couldn't quite master the wrist action needed to flick the line into the stream. The lure would either fall straight down at his feet or sail over his head,

tangling in the rod. My earlier assessment of Jason's patience was spot-on. Time and again, with calm encouragement, he reset Andrew's line and urged him to try again.

It wasn't much longer before the call went up: the barbecue was ready for the meat. We gathered around the fire in a way that, I imagined, echoed our ancient ancestors—cooking food, basking in the warmth. We were still layered against the cold; the sun had yet to crest the easterly mountain. But the shadow line was inching its way steadily across the river.

And then, suddenly, the sun burst around the northern tip of the range, flooding the valley with golden light. The temperature soared—rising by about twenty degrees—and jackets, hats, and scarves were peeled away like the layers of an onion.

First off the barbecue came the sausages—the appetizer in Chilean barbecue culture. Just a quick snack while the main event cooked. I doubt there has ever been a better hotdog. To be fair, it had an unfair advantage: we were starving from the early start and exhilarated by the mountain air. Still—it was tasty.

As we devoured our sausages, Victor loaded up the grill with a frankly ridiculous amount of meat: special Chilean cuts of pork and beef, each prepared in a different style. We were clearly on a high-protein diet today.

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Then, once again, we were shooed away to “go fish.”



I relieved Jason of his duty, insisting that he must go fish this time. He did, and Andrew and I wandered a few hundred yards downstream to try our luck in another spot.

I made my first cast—and instantly, the line jerked. For a moment, I thought I’d snagged a rock (the cause of many of Andrew’s earlier frustrations)—until a large, golden-brown trout leapt from the water, thrashing for freedom.

I looked around. No sign of Jason—my fishing coach. I was on my own.

I reeled quickly, pulling the fighting fish toward the shore, and grabbed it securely. It was the first food I’d ever caught on my own, and I felt a rush of pride—tinged with a touch of sadness.

As a city dweller, I eat meat, of course. But the harsh reality of where it comes from rarely crosses my mind. Yet here it was, right in front of me.

I didn't dwell on it for long. It was a beautiful fish, and Andrew was beside himself with glee—we'd finally caught one!

Andrew continued casting, his legendary patience unwavering despite his own lack of success. Like many Downs people, he can be very stubborn—unwilling to take advice or coaching, especially from me. It used to frustrate me terribly. But I've come to accept that people learn in different ways, and Andrew is no exception.

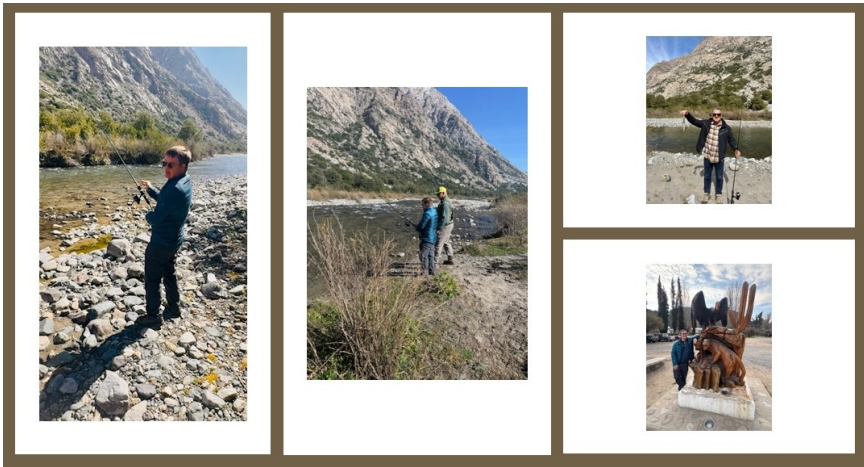
It was the same with fishing. I could see his frustration—but I could also see him working through it, trying to figure out his own way of casting a line that accommodated his challenges with coordination and control. And, cast by cast, he was getting better. I felt certain he'd get it eventually.

“Surely the meat must be ready by now,” I said, using that as our excuse to head back to camp. I wanted to show off my catch.

It wasn't the biggest fish, but I was greeted with loud cheers and high-fives. I was proud of myself—even though, truthfully, there was far more luck than skill involved.

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The meat, thankfully, was ready. And it was as good a barbecue as you could imagine—succulent cuts eaten by hand, straight from the grill, in that breathtaking setting. As soon as a space cleared on the grill, it was filled with more meat—an apparently endless supply.



And for dessert? My trout—freshly cleaned in the river from which it came.

As we ate, Victor pointed to the sky and began an animated conversation with Jason in Spanish. I looked up but saw nothing to get excited about. Eventually, they switched to English:

Condors. Riding the thermals. Way up. Above the mountaintops.

I scanned the sky. Nothing.

“No—there!” they said. “Look closely.”

And finally, I saw them. Four tiny black dots dancing like specks of dust against the blue.

The largest flying birds in the world—wingspans over ten feet—yet flying so high as to be nearly invisible. It was another incredible sight in this remarkable country, even if there was practically nothing to see.

Later, back in town, we came across a wooden sculpture of a condor, a puma (mountain lion) and a fox, the iconic wildlife of the Andes. Andrew was dwarfed by the massive bird!

We never did finish all the barbecue. There was simply too much meat for the four of us, although we gave it our best shot.

We spent the rest of the afternoon by the riverbank. Sometimes fishing. Sometimes sitting in the shade. Sometimes chatting. But mostly in silence, watching the sun traverse the northern sky, until the shadow began to draw down the opposite side of the valley—the same side it had risen from that morning.

All the while, Andrew kept casting. He had developed his own style—unconventional, yes, but effective for the most part. I marvel at how he does that in so many things.

Given enough time and patience, he finds a way. He's unlikely to be world-class, but his way is enough. Enough to bring joy. Enough to bring pride.

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I caught four more fish, three of them released back into the river to grow a bit larger. The river is still recovering from extreme rainfall and flooding two years ago, which stripped it of its fish stocks.

I was sad that, despite casting into some of the river's best spots, Andrew didn't get a single bite. There's a lot of luck in fishing. But to his credit, he kept casting—even after we'd broken camp, packed up, and were ready to head back to the truck.

Still, when it was finally time to leave, he was happy with his day. Proud that he'd figured out how to cast. I was very proud of him too. Next time there will be fish.

We retraced our path down that hilariously bumpy road, back along the gravel autobahn, and eventually onto the smooth, black tarmac—leaving the Andes behind us, glowing in the light of the setting sun.

When the book of days is written, this day, THIS DAY, will feature among the best. The kind of day you dip into to comfort your soul when the days are not so good.

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We slept long and happily that night.

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....to Shining Sea



Halfway through the trip and everything was going swimmingly—except for one tiny problem. We were completely failing in our mission: to eat chili in Chile when it's chilly! We checked every restaurant we visited and even scouted those we passed by. I turned to my new best friend, ChatGPT, for advice, but even she gave little hope. I also explained the mission to Jason and Victor, hoping they could somehow work their magic. They did... though in complete misunderstanding, they tossed a chili pepper (the vegetable) onto the barbecue yesterday. I didn't want to correct them, so I thanked them graciously, trying to hide our disappointment.

I knew chili isn't a typical Chilean dish, but I had expected to find it somewhere. After all, Chile is a Latin American country, rich with Spanish colonial architecture, vibrant rhythms, and surely, a cuisine spiced similarly to other countries in South and Central America. But no—surprisingly, the food here is rather

bland. Don't get me wrong, the meals are great but wholesome; the barbecue, for example, is fantastic, and the bread—have I mentioned how good and varied the bread is? It's exceptional. But when it comes to spice, it's utterly absent.

No wonder my inquiries about chili con carne (chilli with meat) were met with blank stares. Still, I had formulated an emergency backup plan—though it would be a sad one to execute. Just two blocks from our hotel in Santiago, where we would stay again on our last night, there was a Chili's, the American restaurant chain. Surely, surely they'd have chili. But what an anticlimax it would be to order something I could easily get back home at my local mall.

Still, we had four more days to complete our mission, and we remained undeterred.

The high-protein diet continued today as Jason insisted on cooking up bacon and eggs with fried potatoes before we set off to visit his factory, just a ten-minute drive away. As an aside, I coincidentally listened to a podcast during our travels about the humble spud, and I was surprised to learn it didn't originate in North America, as is commonly believed, but right here in the Andes. There are literally thousands of varieties, although most are not cultivated. No wonder the small purple potatoes Jason cooked up were so exceptionally good!

Refueled, we headed to the plant and spent a truly enjoyable morning meeting with Jason's staff and reviewing the setup. It's a great team of people, all of them excited to meet me, I think—but even more so, Andrew (as usual, he was the star!). They don't get many visitors from the “mother ship” up north and were genuinely happy to welcome us. As I mentioned earlier, Jason built this business literally from scratch, and he should be incredibly proud of his accomplishments.

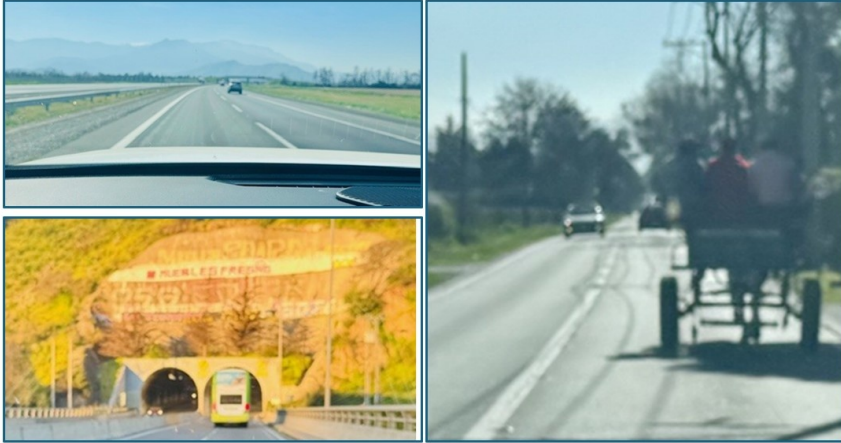
To be honest, we had too much fun with the plant guys and spent more time than planned chatting and getting to know them. I started anxiously checking my watch—we had a four-hour drive ahead of us to reach our next destination, Concon, on the Pacific coast. While I was eager to leave, it would have been rude to cut out after such warm hospitality.

So, we graciously accepted Jason's invitation and set off for one final high-protein meal: a mile-high stack of ribs at a nearby Chilean diner. It was a fantastic experience, as this was a real, local restaurant where the Chileans themselves came to eat, and the menu was thoroughly authentic. I glanced optimistically to see if they had any chili—but, of course, they didn't.

Google Maps offered two routes from Rancagua to Concón. The more direct option was a two-and-a-half-hour drive along the highway north to Santiago before turning west to the coast. The

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alternative was a four-hour, cross-country adventure along winding rural roads through farming communities. Ever the explorer, we took the first exit off the highway and headed into the fields.



To be fair, the roads were excellent—narrow in places, yes, and there were a few moments where I instinctively closed my eyes as fast-moving farm vehicles, clearly more familiar with the local driving etiquette than I was, whizzed past, leaving only the narrowest margin for error. I was thankful for Google Maps and the reassuring voice of my travel-bot, calmly re-routing me again and again. The journey would have been impossible without her, given the endless twists, turns, and sudden detours. But what a beautiful drive it was. The snowcapped Andean peaks slowly faded in the rearview mirror as we passed through tranquil farming communities. Charming, brightly painted

homes—draped in red, white, and blue Chilean flags in honor of the upcoming Independence Day—sat nestled among woodlands, along roads lined with high hedgerows. In the distance, through the bright, unseasonably warm afternoon sunshine, another mountain range began to take shape: the coastal range. Not as majestic as the Andes, but still far taller than anything I ever saw growing up in the UK, with a more lush and green topography than their taller, more rugged cousins we'd visited the day before.

As ever, Andrew was the ideal travel companion—quietly reading yet another book in the *Wings of Fire* series, which he absolutely loves. I still don't understand how he can read so much in a moving car. I'd be hopelessly motion-sick!

The main challenge on these picturesque backroads, however, was figuring out where to stop—especially as the excess soda and coffee from lunch began to make their presence felt. Each little town we passed had brightly colored billboards at the edge, advertising... well, we weren't quite sure what. A local taverna? A hardware store? A place selling washing machines? It was impossible to tell. And once inside the towns, the businesses were equally enigmatic—many of them hidden behind high fences or locked gates.

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Uncertain of the welcome that awaited my Google-translated Spanish in these rural communities, I wasn't bold enough to pull over and ask. So we drove on—through six or seven towns—repeating the same cycle of confusion and mounting urgency, the need to find a restroom growing exponentially with each passing kilometer.



Just as desperation was beginning to set in, we arrived in a slightly larger town: Chorombo. Driving along the main street, I caught sight—out of the corner of my eye—of a small, free-standing wooden structure with a simple sign that read *coffee*. It looked, miraculously, like a normal coffee shop. I quickly pulled off the road, and we walked back to find that it was, in fact, a real coffee shop. And it even had a bathroom. Lord have mercy!

I doubt the place got much passing trade—certainly not from Americans like us—but the family running it could not have been more welcoming. The locals sitting at the two tiny outdoor tables made room for us, while the lady behind the counter prepared our coffees and insisted we try her empanadas—ubiquitous here, and always delicious. Meanwhile, grandma worked hard to keep the granddaughter and pet dog, curious about the strangers, from straying through the garden gate and into the busy road.

I don't know—maybe I'm just lucky—but wherever I travel, I find that people are, by and large, kind and welcoming. For a short time, this family in that small rural Chilean town made us feel like part of their little community. It was a special moment.

One aside: perhaps because we were traveling through the region that bears his name, I couldn't help but be amused by the many roads and buildings named in honor of *Libertador General Bernardo O'Higgins*, the Chilean independence leader who helped free the country from Spanish rule during the Chilean War of Independence. There's even a football team named after him—O'Higgins de Rancagua.

It was the *O'Higgins* part I found funny. It just doesn't sound very Spanish, does it?

Curious, I did a bit of research. As it turns out, Bernardo O'Higgins was of Irish-Spanish descent. His family hailed from County Meath, possibly a remnant of the Spanish Armada, but were forced to flee Ireland in the 18th century after Oliver Cromwell's conquest. A noble and honorable family, steeped in history and valor.

I I felt a bit plebeian for laughing as I turned the corner onto O'Higgins Street in the very Spanish-sounding town of Los Maitenes.

Traveling alone through O'Higgins country, unable to communicate freely, I felt a different kind of isolation from what I'd experienced in the mountains the day before. The scenery and the small communities were unquestionably lovely, but I found myself growing eager to return to a larger town—somewhere with resources easier for a foreign traveler to navigate. So we pressed on, conscious that even with the extra hour of daylight—thanks to the clocks springing forward that weekend—we would likely arrive in Concón just as the sun was setting.

Eventually, we rejoined the main highway to complete the last 30 or so miles of the journey. As we turned a corner and the Pacific Ocean shimmered into view in the late afternoon sun, I was immediately struck by a wave of *déjà vu*. The scene reminded me

powerfully of Monterey, California, where we had lived for several years. Perhaps it shouldn't have been so surprising—both places lie roughly the same distance from the equator, one to the north, the other to the south. But the familiar vegetation silhouetted against the ocean below, the dramatic coastal range behind, even the curves and contours of the four-lane highway winding down toward the sea—it all flooded me with a strange sense of homecoming.

The main difference, though, was that Concón and its surrounding areas were not the exclusive playground of the rich and famous. Here, the hillsides were dotted not with million-dollar mansions, but with high-rise apartment blocks and modest homes—communities of regular people. I would reflect on that often in the days to come.

The final two or three miles into Concón were the most driving fun I've had in ages—like *Mario Kart* come to life as we careened down the steep hillside, navigating sharp hairpin turns. It was the kind of road that demanded your full attention—no chance of taking your eyes off the lane, let alone your hands off the wheel to snap a photo—despite the jaw-dropping coastal panorama unfolding in front of us.

The racetrack came to an abrupt end at a traffic light, just as we exited a tunnel—only to be greeted by the unexpected sight of a

large oil refinery to our right. As someone who works in the chemical industry, I understand the necessity of refined petroleum products for modern life. Still, what a blot on the landscape to place such a facility smack in the middle of that glorious coastline. (I had a similar moment of disbelief upon seeing an oil refinery in Manaus, right on the banks of the Amazon in the heart of the rainforest, during the World Cup in Brazil.)

I didn't dwell on the refinery for long, though, because something else grabbed my attention: a street performer entertaining the drivers waiting at the light. That alone might have been unremarkable—until I noticed what he was juggling. Not pins, not balls, but large, wickedly sharp *machetes*. And as if that weren't enough, he was simultaneously balancing a football (soccer ball) on his forehead. It was wildly impressive. We'd learn over the next few days that juggling at traffic lights is a fairly common sight in these coastal towns.

We were just a few minutes too late to catch the sunset. I could see it sinking behind the houses, and I raced—futilely—toward our oceanfront hotel, hoping for a glimpse before it disappeared. My urgency wasn't helped by the fact that I couldn't, for the life of me, find the entrance to the hotel. Eventually, I located it up a narrow side street, behind a heavy gate marked only with the tiniest of signs and a discreet call button to request access.

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It wasn't the first time on this trip that we'd encountered such serious security. Jason's warning about the growing, if still limited, risk of crime in Chile echoed in my mind as I pressed the button and waited to be let in.

As the gate swung open—despite the curtain of nightfall—I could already tell this hotel, recommended somewhat at random (or perhaps not so randomly) by my new best friend, ChatGPT, was a winner. I couldn't help but smile as we checked in. A small, immaculately furnished boutique hotel built into the hillside with sweeping views of the Pacific, it was clearly more suited to a romantic getaway than a father-son adventure. Maybe I'll bring Elaine next time.



Nevertheless, the staff welcomed us warmly. The desk clerk, Carlos Elliot, spoke some English and, picking up something in my accent, asked where I was from. Naturally, I said “Scotland.”

Carlos lit up and told me—enthusiastically, in his faltering English—that his great-great-grandfather, Thomas Elliot Harris (from whom he gets his name), was a Scotsman. Like many of his generation, he had left the coal mines of Scotland behind in search of a better life, finding it here in Chile, mining copper.

(Side note—I should have mentioned this in yesterday's blog, but I was intrigued by the green hue of the rocks on some of the mountains above our fishing spot. Copper ore. Right there at the surface. So rich in concentration you could practically scoop it up! Today, Chile leads the world in copper production—so vital to the global economy that it remains immune to the current trend toward protectionist tariffs.)

We had missed the sunset, but we arrived just in time for dinner. It was just Andrew and me—and one other couple celebrating their 30th wedding anniversary. The chef, Felipe, came out from the kitchen from time to time to check on us. His English was perfect. He explained that he had spent years living in Australia. A surfer-dude at heart, he trained both as a chef and as an English teacher—skills that enabled him to work his way around the world chasing waves. But Felipe was originally from Concón, and he had just recently taken this job at the hotel so he could come home and surf these waters again.

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After dinner, Andrew—exhausted from the long day's travel—took himself off to bed. I lingered in the lounge over another glass of wine, chatting with the anniversary couple. The woman worked in the travel industry and ran a successful business organizing itineraries for women traveling solo—both Chilean women heading to exotic destinations (she was off to Southeast Asia next week with a group) and North American women coming to explore Chile. Lovely couple.

As we were chatting, Felipe walked by, clocking off after his shift. An idea shot into my mind. With his perfect English, I could finally explain—clearly and in full detail—the purpose of our mission: to eat chili, in Chile, when it's chilly.

He understood immediately—and to my delight, he was genuinely excited by the idea. It might be tricky, he said—the hotel had a small kitchen and limited ingredients—but still, he would see what he could do.

At last... there was hope!

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Sea Fever



I must go down to the seas again, to the lonely sea and the sky,
And all I ask is a tall ship and a star to steer her by;
And the wheel's kick and the wind's song and the white sail's
shaking,
And a grey mist on the sea's face, and a grey dawn breaking.

Sea Fever: John Masefield

I miss the sea terribly. I grew up in a small fishing town on the Firth of Clyde, Scotland's gateway to the Atlantic. The scream of gulls, the echo of boat horns, and—on stormy days—the crash of waves were constants in my life. Yet, for all its nearness, not once did I venture out on the sea from that harbour. I often wonder why. Perhaps it was over-familiarity, or maybe it was my mother's overprotectiveness—she had an irrational fear of water, born of an incident in her own childhood.

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Still, I grew up steeped in a seafaring culture, and returning to the ocean—no matter where in the world—always feels invigorating. Regenerative.

So when I threw back the curtains that first morning in Concón, I was thrilled to see that the ocean was *right there*—barely 100 yards from the balcony outside our bedroom window. I stood in the early morning chill, completely enraptured, breathing in the moment, letting the sight and sound and scent of it all wash over me.



A low bank of distant fog threatened to roll in from the horizon. A lighthouse on the point continued to wink its warning through the haze. Fishing boats came and went from a little harbour about half a mile to my left—much smaller than the vessels I remembered from my childhood, but vibrantly painted, bouncing energetically across the waves as they headed offshore.

A road, lined with a cycling and running trail, separated the hotel from the sea. The trail was busy already, filled with people getting their morning exercise and a healthy dose of ozone

Farther out—maybe half a mile from shore—I noticed a few orange buoys tossing in the surf, but slowly, steadily, moving across the bay. Looking closer, I realized the buoys were attached to swimmers—safety floats to alert passing boats to their presence in the water. I watched them in disbelief. How hardy—or perhaps foolhardy—were those swimmers! I'd tried several times to swim from the beaches in Monterey, but the Pacific was simply too cold. I doubted – and later verified – the water here was any warmer.

In the light of day, the small hotel proved to be every bit as charming as we had imagined upon our arrival the night before. The staff continued to spoil us with their attentive service, and the owner and her husband took a special interest in making sure we had a great stay, offering thoughtful advice and recommendations.

Alicia, the breakfast attendant, seemed to understand the special nature of our father-son adventure. She took a clear shine to Andrew, smiling and fussing over him with a tenderness that, at moments, I'm sure brought a tear to her eye. She was lovely. Breakfast itself was simple—coffee, freshly squeezed juice in

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flavors I couldn't quite identify, fruit, cheese, cold cuts, eggs, and toast—but exquisitely served at a table overlooking the awakening bay. A perfect start to the day.

Eager to explore, we set out to see more of Concón and the neighboring towns of Reñaca, Viña del Mar, and, across the Bahía de Valparaíso, the port city that gave the bay its name: Valparaíso.

Retrieving our car, we waited patiently for the heavy metal security gate to retract and then headed south along the coastal road. We passed through Concón, past the lighthouse—now silent after its night of blinking—and soon arrived at the Reñaca Dunes, a massive pile of sand formed over the millennia by the movement of the tides, reminiscent of, though significantly smaller than, the towering dunes I am familiar with along the shore of Lake Michigan.



From a small parking lot, a well-worn but manicured footpath led up a rocky outcrop where the dunes came fully into view. Yet, despite their scale, the real showstopper was the coastline itself—an unbroken stretch of dramatic Pacific beauty that opened before us, sweeping across the full length of the bay to the north and the south. We lingered for quite a while, wandering the paths and watching the waves crash against the rugged shore.

Eventually, we continued south to Reñaca Beach, a mile-long stretch of perfect golden sand edging a sea of flawless, rolling waves. It looked ideal for surfing, though Felipe the chef would later explain that the surf here was too irregular and unpredictable—perhaps why the beach was devoid of surfers.

Deciding to park and take a closer look, we encountered the first (and I believe only) real problem of our trip – and even this was minor. As we got out of the car, an elderly man approached us. Brown-skinned, grey-haired, and wearing a bright orange high-vis vest, he was clearly agitated. Though he spoke no English, I gathered from his animated gestures that we had somehow violated a parking rule.

He pointed to a nearby sign—in Spanish—which implied parking here wasn't free. But how much it cost, when payment was required, and to whom the fee was owed was all unclear.

There were no parking meters. I offered him a credit card, but he shook his head vigorously. Stupidly—and unusually—I had left my pesos back at the hotel. Not wanting to risk the wrath of the parking authorities (if indeed that's who he was), we got back in the car and moved on.

But it soon became clear that this was the situation everywhere along the coast. Defeated, we returned to the hotel for cash—and, hopefully, some clarification.

Back at the hotel, I explained my confusion to the owner's husband, who had passable English. He laughed and explained that the men in orange vests were official/unofficial parking attendants. A small “tip” of 300 pesos—and certainly no more than 500 (about 50 US cents)—was all they expected, usually paid upon your return to the car.

It reminded me of the boys you'd occasionally see on the streets of Glasgow:

“Gies a pound and I'll mind your car while you're away,” they'd say.

Or, to put it another way: *“Give me a pound and me and my mates won't kick the mirrors off your car.”* Just wee boys having fun! I suppose it was fair value.

Armed with this vital local knowledge, we drove south again, this time a little further—to Playa Blanca (“White Beach”) in Viña

del Mar. In our opinion, the most glamorous and picturesque town along the entire bay.

As we slowed down, one of the orange-jacketed men flagged us toward a narrow parking space—one of the few remaining. To be honest, these men were quite helpful at times, maintaining some semblance of order amid the chaos. As I got out, he signaled that the cost to park was 2,000 pesos. But with the hotel owner's advice still ringing in my ears, I stood my ground at 500. The man relented. I was quite proud of myself—I'm usually hopeless at haggling!

By now, it was lunchtime. Our new mission was to find a restaurant: **Cap Ducal**, highly recommended by the anniversary couple I'd met the night before. The restaurant was perched on a promontory overlooking the bay, its angular, modern architecture seemingly made almost entirely of glass to avoid obstructing the stunning view.

Marble paths wound through perfectly manicured lawns, and we were greeted by sharply dressed waiters in crisp white shirts, black ties, and long black aprons. We were seated at a table draped in pristine white linen, with gleaming silverware to match.

It didn't take long to realize this place might not be for us. My suspicions were confirmed when I opened the menu. For the first

and only time during our trip, my jaw hit the floor at the prices. Chile, by and large, had been refreshingly affordable—especially when compared to the U.S.—but this was another world entirely. My impression of Viña del Mar as the most upscale town along the bay was proving accurate.

Graciously, we made our excuses—and quietly slipped away.

Though it was still early spring in the southern hemisphere, we had been blessed with wonderful weather. Apart from a very chilly Sunday in Santiago (and, of course, the brisk early mornings in the high Andes), the skies had been clear and sunny, with temperatures around 80°F and only the gentlest of breezes.

We wandered a little farther inland from the beach, through a pretty park where the breeze stirred the lush vegetation and rustled the palm trees—I always feel I am somewhere special when there are palm trees. Funny, really—we had so overpacked for this trip. Planning for the worst, we'd stuffed our bulging suitcases with puffer jackets, hats, gloves, and scarves. And here we were, basking in the sunshine, completely overprepared for a heatwave we hadn't expected.

A couple of blocks from the beach, we found a strip of modestly priced restaurants, each with a host or hostess standing outside, eager to beckon us in. But there was only ever going to be one

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choice. It was the vivid pink **Johnnie Walker** statue out front that first caught our attention, as absurd as it was eye-catching. And then we saw the menu: **Tex-Mex cuisine**.



Surely... *surely*... this was the moment. The home of **chili con carne**—in Chile—even if the day wasn't chilly. Our quest, at last, complete?

We hurried inside, filled with expectation.

And while it *was* Tex-Mex—surprisingly good, actually, especially the pulled pork tacos—there was, once again... no chili.

A twinge of despair began to creep in. If *not here*, then where?

Perhaps even **Chili's**, our last-resort backup plan, would let us down.

Onward. Further south to the far side of the bay: Valparaíso.

“Be careful if you go to Valparaíso,” said the hotel owner’s husband. “Many pickpockets.”

“Be very, very careful if you go to Valparaíso,” warned the Tex-Mex waiter. “Many pickpockets.”

“Be extremely careful here in Valparaíso,” said the barista at the coffee shop in the town square, eyeing my roll of pesos. “Many pickpockets.”

We got the message.

This is a port town, and it had that air of transience and low-level criminality that sometimes blankets such places. I kept my valuables close in a small shoulder bag, the clasp turned inward. Andrew, perhaps a little spooked by all the warnings, spent the entire visit with his hand firmly in his pocket, clutching his phone for dear life.

We stopped for coffee in the town square—earlier than usual—for a very specific reason. My phone had buzzed with a reminder: today was the release of the first tranche of tickets for the 2026 FIFA World Cup. For a brief moment, our grand chili quest took a back seat as I scrambled to get in line on the FIFA website.

At the same time, I was frantically trying to alert my World Cup compadre, Dave, that the moment had arrived. Well—*not* tickets for sale exactly. This was the lottery to *enter* the lottery to *maybe* buy up to four tickets from the first release. A lottery for the lottery, if you will. To make matters more absurd, these tickets were for matches where we wouldn't even know who was playing yet, since qualification is still ongoing and the draw hasn't been made.

Still—fortune favors the brave. So I (and later Dave) duly submitted our applications into FIFA's twisted raffle system. I'll save the rest of my commentary for the *next* World Cup blog—assuming I win, and there *is* a next blog.

As for Valparaíso... it was.....*interesting*.

It's probably unfair to judge a place based on a two-hour visit, but the lasting impression wasn't a great one. Pickpocket warnings aside, the most striking feature of the city was the graffiti—or was it street art? It was hard to tell where creativity ended and vandalism began. Every surface was scrawled with something. Maybe some of it had political meaning, but to my eye it was more destructive than expressive, reinforcing the sense of unease we'd been warned about.

“Be very careful here in Valparaíso,” said the funicular operator as we boarded the car. “Many pickpockets.”

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The funicular was recommended to us by the hotel owner's husband. It took some effort to find, hidden at the end of a narrow alleyway off the main street. Cognizant of the pickpocket warnings, we were uneasy squeezing through the alley, unsure what—or who—we might meet.

This particular funicular was less of a tourist attraction than the one in Santiago. It served a practical purpose: helping locals ascend the steep hillsides rather than brave the endless stairs. For the equivalent of 30 US cents, it carried us effortlessly to the top, offering views out over the port and the wide bay beyond.



Up here, the graffiti transformed into genuine street art. Brightly painted walls and gateways burst with colour and creativity, reflecting elements of Chilean culture. We wandered slowly through the narrow backstreets, descending the hillside by way

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of twisting stairs and alleyways. The art really *was* beautiful, but the streets were deserted, and my imagination began to race. I suddenly felt quite vulnerable and urged Andrew to quicken his pace as we descended the final flights of steps and emerged once more into the more populated parts of town.



No—Valparaíso was not for us. Although I should add, however, that my daughter Lorna visited the city a few years ago and came away with a much more favorable impression.

Retracing our steps to the car, we passed through another plaza, alive with the hustle and bustle of a local market. I had noticed it when we arrived, but in my World Cup lottery urgency, I hadn't stopped to take it in. It was a cheerful, energetic place, full of laughter and community spirit—a welcome contrast that did much to repair my initial, somewhat negative impression of the town.

The stallholders called out enthusiastically, beckoning us to examine their wares—produce, crafts, artwork, and all the usual fare typical of a local market. I paused briefly at a stall selling knitted goods, and again at another offering garden plants and accessories, wondering if I could find something to take home for Elaine. Lacking confidence in my ability to choose well, I used our overstuffed suitcases as an excuse to buy nothing.

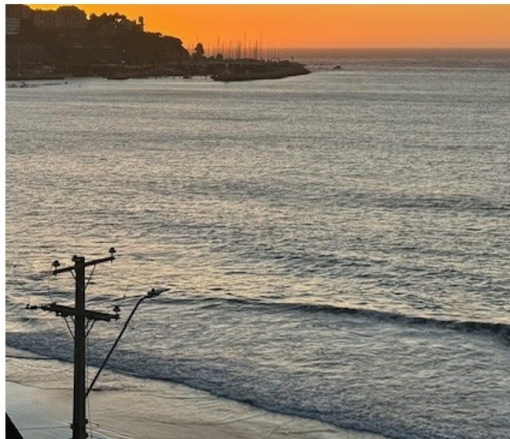
It had been a long day, and by the time we navigated the surprisingly hectic rush hour traffic back to the hotel, we were more than ready for a rest. Andrew quickly reacquainted himself with his Nintendo DS—which hadn't seen the light of day since Santiago—while I read and wrote for a while. The decision to stay in a small boutique hotel, even with some help from ChatGPT, turned out to be a perfect one. The tranquil, family-friendly vibe and discreet, attentive service made it an ideal place to unwind after the stress of getting our bearings in a new place.

I say stressful, but truthfully, I was quietly impressed by how well we—okay, let's be honest, I—had managed to find our way around a foreign country with little support and without speaking the language. I suppose all those years of business travel experience finally paid off.

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We decided to wait for sunset before heading out to find dinner, but unfortunately, I neglected to check which direction the hotel faced and, annoyingly, it pointed northwest. The sun set behind a rocky outcrop far to the left of our balcony—not quite the full show we had hoped for. Noted for tomorrow: find a better vantage point.

The hotel was about a ten-minute walk from the main part of Concón, along the road that separated it from the sea. We descended several flights of stairs to reach the pedestrian entrance at street level, where we came to another heavy metal security door. After buzzing to open it, we stepped out and began our walk into town. The route took us past the small harbor I'd seen from our balcony that morning, the colorful little boats now moored in neat rows for the night.



As night settled around us, I found myself once again slightly uneasy, just as I had been in the backstreets of Valparaíso. The presence of such a formidable security gate stirred my imagination. But as joggers and cyclists passed us steadily, I reminded myself the risk was probably minimal—more imagined than real.

We were heading for a fish restaurant recommended by the anniversary couple we'd met the night before. This time, the prices didn't make my eyes pop. The small, dimly lit restaurant sat right on the shoreline, and I took it to be a typical Chilean family-run place—no English spoken, so Google Translate became my lifeline for navigating the menu.

At first, the staff were a little standoffish—perhaps they weren't used to foreign tourists. But everything changed once the empanadas arrived. They were, without question, the best we'd had in Chile: flaky, buttery pastry wrapped around a piping hot beef or vegetarian filling. That's saying something, considering how many we'd eaten throughout our trip. I made a point—again, through Google Translate—of telling our server, Sebastián, just how much we loved them. Instantly, the frosty atmosphere melted.

By the end of the meal—a beautiful, fresh river trout in honor of our mountain trip two days earlier, followed by what was

arguably the best crème brûlée I've ever tasted—we were all best friends. It's hard to claim that anything topped the barbecue in the high Andes, which was hands-down the best meal we had in Chile—but this one came a very close second.

Afterwards, we made our way back to the hotel along the now mostly deserted jogging and cycling path. The dim lighting and quiet surroundings stirred my imagination once again, and I found myself hurrying Andrew along. But, of course, nothing happened and soon we were safely back in our room. And shortly after that we were asleep. This hectic schedule is tiring!

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Quest Grade : 3.5 out of 4



I had to work today. I didn't want to, but there were phone calls and meetings that couldn't be avoided. Still, it's the little sacrifices like this that pay for adventures like ours.

We spent the morning around the hotel while I attended to business—which, of course, wasn't a terrible place to be. I promised Andrew I'd be finished by 1 p.m., and then we could properly start our day. His DS kept him entertained in the meantime.

That said, I was a little annoyed when the calls and meetings dragged on well past their scheduled time. Some people just love to talk.

My "office" for the day was the hotel lounge, with its large bay window overlooking the ocean. Marina, the hotel cat—the friendliest I've ever met—was curled up in my lap for company the whole time. The wonderfully kind hotel staff even brought

lunch to the little table I'd claimed in the corner. Honestly, I shouldn't complain.

By the time the last call ended, it was already around 3 p.m. before we could set off into town.

In addition to continuing our hunt for the elusive chili, we had some other important quests for the day:

Dip our toes in the ocean.

Find postcards to send home.

Watch a proper sunset

We headed straight for Playa Cochoa, a small beach I'd spotted about five miles south of the hotel. Tucked into a cove and surrounded by cafés and restaurants, it looked like a calmer and safer spot than the main beaches, where strong waves crash aggressively onto the shore. The beach always seemed busy, which suggested it was the locals' preferred swimming spot.

After our now-customary afternoon coffee at a small roadside café, we made our way down a steep flight of steps to the sand. Sadly, despite the crowds of people lounging on towels, the beach was filthy—streaked with what looked like oil.

On the plus side, as expected, the waves were gentler here. If we were going to dip our toes anywhere, this would be the place.

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The shoreline was buzzing with people of all ages playing in the surf. The water looked almost inviting—was it warm enough for a proper swim?



Nope. It was freezing—every bit as cold as I remember Monterey Bay in California. I couldn't understand how the locals tolerated it, let alone the open-water swimmers I'd seen from the hotel balcony!

We ticked the toe-dipping box very quickly, and—keeping one eye on the questionable water quality—made a swift retreat, put our shoes and socks back on, and headed into town to look for postcards.

We searched for the next hour: gift shops, gas stations, supermarkets, cafés—everywhere. But apparently, postcards are as rare in Chile as chili. It just doesn't seem to be a thing here.

Maybe most travelers don't bother with postcards anymore now that holiday snaps can be shared instantly online. But the Nicols still enjoy sending and receiving traditional cards via good old snail mail.

Alas, it wasn't to be—not here, anyway. Ironically, we *did* eventually find postcards... at the Santiago airport gift shop, on our way out of the country. So postcards *will* be received—just with an American postmark instead of a Chilean one.

Thanks to modern technology, we were also able to create and send a few custom postcards via the “Postcard” app. Where there's a will!

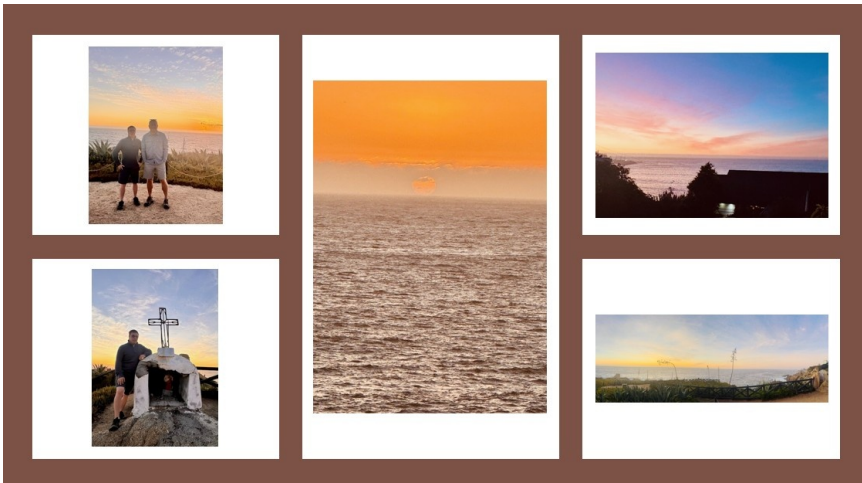
Naturally, all that questing left us hungry, so we paused for another coffee—and a slice of cake—before heading to Renaca Beach for an hour of sunbathing. It was beautiful, but noticeably more hazardous. The sand was clean, but the beach dropped off sharply into the surf, with powerful waves and riptide warnings posted along the shore. We kept a respectful distance from the water, eyeing the high-tide marks left by sneaker waves—those sudden surges that creep up without warning, ready to snatch the unwary who are careless enough to turn their backs on the sea.

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As the afternoon waned, we sat back and watched the sun begin its slow descent toward the western horizon.

Of course, one other quest remained. After the disappointment of the previous night's sunset, I had to find a better vantage point for tonight. Consulting a map to be absolutely sure that I knew which way was west, I deduced that the rocky outcrop at the edge of the dunes—where we had begun our time at Bahía Valparaíso the day before - was the perfect spot.

So, a few minutes before sunset, we made our way to the top of that hill. There, surrounded by families and couples gathered for the same moment, we stood and watched the timeless wonder of the sun slipping into the vast Pacific Ocean—confident, of course, that it would rise again in the east come morning.



Sadly, the sun's final embers were obscured by the thick bank of fog that still lurked offshore. Yet in a way, that made the spectacle even more memorable. The sun's brilliance was softened just enough that we could watch it directly as, degree by degree, it slipped below the horizon.

As night fell, the temperature dropped—finally becoming, well, *chilly*—and we were grateful for the warm sweaters we'd brought, just in case. Climbing back into the car, we returned to the hotel for dinner happy with our days work - three of four quests complete!

Remarkably, we were still the only guests in the hotel—a surprise, given how beautiful and peaceful the place was. That evening, Felipe became our personal chef, emerging from the kitchen to chat with us about the evening's menu. We settled on a gnocchi appetizer followed by beef ribs, and—what was becoming a Chilean tradition—another *crème brûlée* for dessert.

We ordered a cold beer and relaxed while Chef Felipe disappeared to begin preparing our meal. Partway through the appetizer, he returned with a surprise: a separate plate, “chef's treat”—empanadas. But these weren't just any empanadas. Having remembered our conversation from a couple of nights ago, Felipe had made chili-stuffed empanadas especially for Andrew.

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What a fantastic and thoughtful gesture. It wasn't exactly the chili con carne we'd been searching for, but if we don't manage to find the real thing in our remaining two days, we'll gladly count these delicious empanadas—which really were outstanding—as a win.



Marina, the ever-present hotel cat, lounged nearby, still seeking our attention but entirely uninterested in our little celebration.

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Hot Chili



Don't you hate the last day of a holiday? By definition, you're still there, but your mind is already in departure mode—packing, farewells, and travel looming ahead. Yes, we enjoyed one last leisurely breakfast overlooking the Pacific, followed by a final walk along the shore, but in spirit, we were already in the car, heading back to Santiago. In situations like this, my approach tends to be “vámonos”—let's go—and just get on with it. So, luggage was loaded, goodbyes were said to the staff we had gotten to know so well in such a short time, and we were off.

But we weren't heading directly to Santiago. We had opted for the direct freeway to the city—nothing like the cross-country adventure we'd taken on the way there. To keep things interesting, I'd asked my trusty travel companion, ChatGPT, for recommendations on places to stop along the way. Much to my delight, I discovered that our route passed through one of Chile's most prominent wine regions, centered around the Casablanca

Valley (the *white house*, as someone pointed out. In all my years thinking of the movie and the city in Morocco, I'd never realized the translation!).

Andrew had picked up a few Spanish words during the trip, *cerveza* being one of them. He's more of a beer man than a wine guy, but with a little persuasion, I convinced him to detour to a winery so that Dad could indulge. He'd mentioned several times throughout the trip that he wanted "experiences," and so, after a little convincing, he agreed that a winery tour would be just another side of Chile to explore.

Our destination was *Casas del Bosque*, highly recommended by Ms. GPT for its wine—typical of the region—but especially for the tour and restaurant. It was almost exactly halfway between Concon and Santiago, and after an hour or so, we pulled off the freeway and, guided by GPS, navigated through the quaint rural town of Casablanca, which gave the region its name. The day was perfect: a crisp blue sky, temperatures in the low 80s Fahrenheit, and the lightest breeze stirring the pine trees as we drove out of town. After a few miles, orchards gave way to neatly ordered rows of grapevines.

As we got deeper into the rural roads, I began to wonder if we were headed in the right direction—especially when the route led us to a heavy metal gate guarding the entrance to the winery.

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With a hint of hesitation, I thought we might be turned away for trespassing, but the security guard approached us, asked to see my driver's license, noted down a few details, and then pressed a button to open the gate. We were in.



It was like entering a theme park: on one side of the gate, the ordinary world; on the other, a picturesque fantasy world of perfectly manicured driveways, immaculate gardens, and beautiful Spanish colonial-style buildings. Despite my perhaps unfair expectations of a winery in the developing world, this place was on par with anything I'd seen in Napa or Tuscany. To emphasize this, a signpost proudly pointed to the world's famous wine regions, including Bordeaux, Napa, and Tuscany.

It was clear that *Casas del Bosque* had made an effort to cater to international visitors, with nearly every staff member fluent in English—from the security guard to the people checking us in

for the tour, to the restaurant staff and the guide. This was, by far, the easiest experience we had in Chile, thanks to the attentive and helpful team.

We toured the vineyard, though the grapes, still dormant, wouldn't emerge for weeks. We learned about the terroir—granite-based soil cooled by sea breezes, only 12 miles away. This climate is ideal for varieties like Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, and Pinot Noir. By Chilean standards, *Casas del Bosque* isn't a large estate, producing only 1.3 million liters per year (some estates produce ten times that), but it felt impressively scaled as we toured the vat rooms and cellars, learning about the winemaking process. Pleasingly, Andrew was deeply interested and engaged.

Funny how quickly a random group can come together. We were only with our fellow tourists for an hour, but we had all bonded, likely aided by the free-flowing wine! Our group included a family from Shenzhen, China—a place I know well—another family from southern Chile who had chosen the English-language tour to practice their skills, and an Australian woman who was attending a conference of bariatric surgeons in Santiago. She took a particular shine to Andrew and sat with us as we—well, mostly he—learned the finer points of wine tasting, working our way through six of the winery's best vintages.

When she asked Andrew which wine he liked best, he confidently replied, “I really like the Chardonnay. But I quite liked the Pinot too.” Later, Andrew confessed to me that now, at the age of 35, he might start swapping his *cerveza* for wine more often!

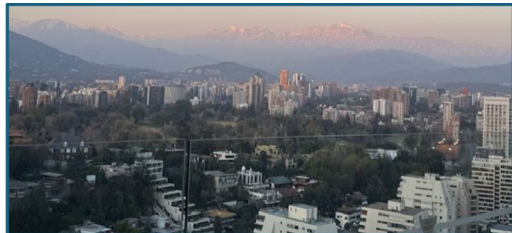
I’m no sommelier—like Andrew, I only came to wine a little later in life—but I’d like to think I know my way around the major wine regions and varieties. So I was surprised to learn that I’d missed one. I had always associated Malbec with Chilean wine. But no—here, Carménère is king. Interestingly, the variety originated in Italy but was thought to have died out over a hundred years ago due to disease. In the 1960s, someone noticed that some vines in a Merlot vineyard in Chile didn’t look like Merlot. With the help of DNA analysis, it was discovered that these rogue vines were Carménère, likely shipped to the New World among a batch of Merlot cuttings before the blight wiped it out in Europe. Now, Carménère is widely grown in Chile—and in small amounts in California and Italy—and is the country’s signature grape.

Naturally, I had to have another glass of Carménère to accompany lunch at the winery’s terrace restaurant. Andrew, predictably, ordered Chardonnay. We savored a delicious and, considering the setting, surprisingly inexpensive lunch while sipping our wine and chatting with the knowledgeable servers. One of them, in particular, caught my attention. She spoke

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perfect English, but with an accent that wasn't Spanish. She turned out to be Swedish by birth, having moved to Chile as a child when her mother remarried a Chilean man. In addition to English, Swedish, and Spanish, she spoke Portuguese and was learning Italian and German. I am in awe of people with such language skills—I've barely mastered English!

Casas del Bosque wasn't part of our original plan, but what a pleasant surprise. A bonus treat in what had already been an enriching trip through Chile. We were very glad we took the detour, and equally glad we didn't turn back when we first saw the imposing security gate. But eventually, it was time to leave and complete our drive back to Santiago. Hopefully, we would make it there before the Friday afternoon rush hour. I was proud that I had navigated through Chile without dinging the rental car, and I didn't want to fail in the final miles.



I'm not typically one for superlatives, but I felt a quiet sense of triumph as we entered the outskirts of Santiago. Of course, in the grand annals of exploration, our little adventure would barely warrant a footnote. Chile—at least the parts we visited—is no remote wilderness or third-world backwater. But for us, in our own way, this was a frontier: navigating a foreign country, in a different language, with minimal support. Especially so for me, as I was Andrew's lifeline throughout the trip.

I'll admit it now: in the weeks leading up to our departure, and indeed throughout our time in Chile, I lived with constant anxiety. We had a wonderful experience—everything a father-son trip should be—but the “what ifs” loomed large. If something had gone wrong—if I'd been injured or suddenly taken ill—Andrew, to put it bluntly, would have been screwed - completely unprepared to cope with the situation on his own.

To ease my concern and have at least a basic fallback plan, I prepared small laminated cards for Andrew. On one side were emergency numbers—including my colleague Jason's, who was at least somewhat local—and on the other, a miniature copy of his passport. I tucked it inside his phone case and instructed him that, if something went badly wrong, he should hand it to a friendly police officer or storeowner. Had it come to that, my faith in the kindness of strangers would've been well and truly tested.

Thankfully, it never did.

And so, we rolled into Santiago on a wave of quiet celebration—triumph might be too strong a word, but it felt close. One last glimpse of the majestic Andes, rising up to form their eternal backdrop to the city, and we knew the journey was nearly complete.

The final few miles were driven with more than a little caution—there was no way I was going to let anything happen now, not at the final hurdle. And so, just like that, the Jaiwoo—a pleasantly competent piece of Chinese engineering—was returned safely to Hertz. Not a scratch. Not a single ding.

We checked back into the W—our sanctuary in the city. As I mentioned earlier, we'd pushed the boat out to stay here. I knew the W brand from other cities and wanted to ensure a certain level of comfort and service, especially given that both the city—and the country—were unknown quantities to us. And comfort and service we got, in abundance.

Yes, the W is one of Marriott's top-tier properties, but even by those standards, the staff's attentiveness stood out. At one point, I even had a quiet word with Daniella—who bore the wonderfully extravagant title of *Whatever/Whenever Manager & W Insider* (essentially, the customer service manager). I told her about our

quest: to eat chili, in Chile, when it's chilly. Once again, I had to explain what *chili* actually was—but Daniella was intrigued and as luck would have it, became genuinely invested in the mission.

As the sun began to set on our Chilean adventure, symbolically, we made our way to the roof top bar. It was closed to the public as a company – interestingly, a solar panel business – had bought out the venue for a very grand, private black-tie event. But the enterprising hostess had laid out a few small tables for us residents, behind the DJ station, beside the rooftop swimming pool, which, curiously, was drained empty. Watching the glamorous Santiaguinos in their finery, we felt, by comparison, rather shabby tucked in that corner, savoring a final carmenere and pina colada as we watched the final dance of the Chilean sunset on the magnificent Andean mountains.

“Let's go get some dinner,” I said as night finally fell.

“Where are we going?” Andrew asked.

“Oh, as it's the last night, I made a reservation at the lobby restaurant here in the hotel. Something simple and easy.”

We rode the elevator down and walked across to the host stand. As we approached, the host looked up with a smile and asked, “Mr. Nicol?”

I returned his knowing grin. “Yes.”

Chili? In Chile? When It's Chilly? : James Nicol

Salvador, the host, guided us to a table in the center of the lounge and took our drink order—yet another Carménère for me, and one last cerveza for Andrew.

Hungry as ever, Andrew began scanning the menu, which was—of course—devoid of anything resembling chili. No surprise there. After about ten minutes, he was getting impatient and announced he was ready to order: fish and chips.

“Hold on,” I said, trying to buy a little time. “Maybe the waiter will come and tell us about the specials.”

And right on cue, from the corner of my eye, I saw Santiago—the host—and a second waiter making their way toward us, carrying a tray. With his back to them, Andrew didn’t notice until they arrived at our table and placed it in front of him: a perfect bowl of piping-hot chili con carne, complete with a side of crunchy chips.

A picture paints a thousand words—and Andrew’s face was just that: a picture. Surprise, delight, and utter joy.

Chili? In Chile? When It's Chilly? : James Nicol



Mission accomplished.

It was Daniella—the ever-attentive customer care manager—who made it happen. When she'd learned about our quest to eat chili, in Chile, when it's chilly, she was immediately on board. "I'm sure our chef would love to make that for you," she'd said.

There was only one problem: the Chilean chef, wasn't entirely sure what chili con carne was. Truly—the dish is practically unknown here.

Chili? In Chile? When It's Chilly? : James Nicol

So to be sure, I downloaded a Gordon Ramsay's recipe, translated it into Spanish with the help of Google Translate, and emailed it to the chef.

He nailed it.

The result? Tender pieces of beef, slow-cooked in a rich tomato and vegetable sauce, studded with black beans and just the right amount of spice to make it zing.

The dish didn't last long.

Between us, it was gone in minutes—though to be fair, I left most of it for Andrew. I called the waiter over to ask, hopefully, if there might be a little more in the kitchen. After a quick check, the answer came back—sadly, no. The chef had prepared just enough for that one perfect serving.

And maybe that made it even more special. Just that one bowl, made just for us, on that one night, never to be served again. A one-off moment, never to be repeated.

And do you know what?

To top it off, the hotel refused to charge us. "Too special," they said. "We wouldn't dream of taking your money." Instead, they handed me a gift to mark our celebration: a lovely bottle of Chilean red. (Sadly, a Cabernet—not my new favorite Carménère—but a kind gesture all the same.)

Chili? In Chile? When It's Chilly? : James Nicol

Let's be honest: going all that way to eat chili in Chile when it's chilly was, well... *silly*. Just a throwaway line Andrew had been saying for years. But that silly little phrase became the spark, the catalyst, the reason for this extraordinary journey.

Of course, it was never really about the chili.

As Andrew said many times along the way, it was about the experience—of being in Chile. The rich culture, the staggering natural beauty, the warmth of its people. But more than that, it was about being traveling with my son. Something that, when he was a little boy, I never imagined would be possible.

And yet, here we were. Despite all the challenges over the years, he has grown into a curious, capable, independent young man. Watching that unfold, day by day, mile by mile, brought me immeasurable joy. It was, quite simply, a privilege to share this adventure with him.

Still... while the weather may have been unseasonably warm, it would have been a *tragedy* not to have eaten chili, in Chile, when it was chilly.

The completion of that silly, wonderful quest was, at least in our eyes, nothing short of a triumph.

