

Santiago is the vibrant and cosmopolitan capital of Chile

Publisher's note: This is the first of four stories on my recent trip to Chile.

By David Sasser
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Santiago, also known as Santiago de Chile, is the largest city in Chile and one of the largest cities in the Americas. This beautiful city has a rich history and culture, with grand architecture, museums, bustling markets, galleries, theatres and excellent dining and nightlife. Located in the country's central valley, it is the center of the Santiago Metropolitan Region with a population of seven million, and accounts for 40 percent of Chile's total population.

Leandro and I had an amazing tour of Santiago in March with our guide, Julio Peraldi, and his son, Matías, of **Julio Private Tours** (julioprivatetours.com).

Founded in 1541 by the Spanish conquistador **Pedro de Valdivia**, Santiago has served as the capital of Chile since colonial times. The city has a downtown core of 19th-century neoclassical architecture and winding side-streets featuring a mix of art deco and neo-gothic styles.

Santiago's **Plaza de Armas** has remained the heart of the city since it was founded in 1541.

If you've been to other Latin American cities, you may recognize the name "Plaza de Armas." Plaza de Armas literally means a "square of weapons." The concept behind this dates back hundreds of years to when Spanish conquistadors were establishing and laying out the grid for cities in the Americas. A single city block would intentionally be left empty and surrounded by important government offices, cathedrals, and the like. In the event of an attack, the city's population could easily gather there to be armed and protected.

The beautiful structures surrounding Plaza de Armas are newer, largely completed in the nineteenth century. Today, the Metropolitan Cathedral of Santiago and the **Central Post Office** remain among the most eye-catching facades.

Santiago's **Metropolitan Cathedral** (catedraldesantiago.cl) is considered one of the finest examples of religious architecture in South America, and a must-see thanks to its stunning floor tiles and frescoed ceilings. Flanking the western edge of Plaza de Armas, this neoclassical cathedral has a history that stretches back to 1541, when city founder Pedro de Valdivia requested a place of worship be constructed at the edge of Santiago's colonial square. However, throughout the three centuries that followed, the original build-

ing succumbed to numerous fires and earthquakes. The towering cathedral that stands today underwent construction around 1750, and in the 1780s, Italian architect Joaquín Toesca added a new twist—a blend of neoclassical style with baroque elements. The result is an interior that boasts intricate stained glass windows and an elaborate altar ornamented with marble and deep blue lapis lazuli. The seat of the Archbishop of Santiago de Chile, the cathedral is open to visitors throughout the day. You can easily spend an hour or more wandering around the immensity of its interior.

Another notable sight at the Plaza de Armas is the **Palacio de la Real Audiencia de Santiago**, or the Royal Palace. The government seat of Santiago moved to the palace at La Moneda over a century ago, but this building today houses the **National History Museum**. You can visit this historical building and the hundreds of artifacts inside any day until 6 pm, with the exception of Monday.

San Cristóbal Hill, or Cerro San Cristóbal, stands nearly 3,000 feet above the rest of **Metropolitan Park**, a large swath of green spread between the neighborhoods of Providencia and Vitacura and the largest urban park in Chile. The hill's height affords spectacular views of the city. To reach the top of the hill, hop on the **funicular** located on the north end of Pío Nono Street. Or if you prefer a challenge, the rewarding ascent on foot takes about 90 minutes.

Inaugurated in 1925, the funicular joins Plaza Caupolicán with the summit of San Cristóbal Hill. Funiculars are cable railroads located on a mountainside in which ascending and descending cars are counterbalanced. Cars are permanently connected to the opposite ends of the same steel cable, known as a haul rope. While one car descends the slope at one end, the other car is pulled upwards by the other end of the haul rope. Since the weight of the two cars is counterbalanced, no lifting force is required to move them. As it steeply ascends the hill, the city and its valley spreads out below with sweeping views. The station, shaped like a medieval tower, was built with stone cut from the hill by the architect Luciano Kulczewski. It was declared a National Historical Monument in 2000.

There are several vendors at the top of the hill and Julio bought Leandro and I a **mote con huesillos**, a traditional Chilean drink that combines cooked husked wheat with dried peaches. It's a refreshing treat during

warm weather and a cultural symbol in Chile, representing traditional flavors and culinary heritage. It is essential to serve it well chilled.

Climbing more steps we reached the **Sanctuary of the Immaculate Conception** atop San Cristóbal Hill. With its white hue, the statue of the Virgin Mary is 72 feet high, and an emblematic monument of Santiago that can be seen from all over the city. At the base of the statue is a small chapel where Pope John Paul II once prayed and blessed the city on April 1, 1987. Adjacent to the statue, an amphitheater serves as a venue for masses and other religious ceremonies. Nearby, a small chapel provides a serene space for prayer.

Although the Mercado Central and La Vega are two separate marketplaces, they are located next to each other in Santiago's Recoleta neighborhood.

Mercado Central is Santiago's celebrated fresh fish market, which at one time was listed by National Geographic as one of the Top 10 Food Markets in the world. Under a wrought-iron, art nouveau canopy dating from 1872, this animated fish market is an array of vendors selling a variety of sea creatures, from barnacles to giant squid, many unlabeled, untranslatable, or unknown outside of Chile. Marvel at the fishmongers speed and skill, but beware of scalpers and slippery surfaces. The central plaza has a variety of seafood restaurants, but they are overpriced and you can find a better meal elsewhere.

Neighbouring **La Vega** (lavegacentral.com) is a crowded, popular fruit and vegetable market and the perfect place to watch Santiago's locals come and go. Here you will find extensive arrays of vegetables and fruits grown in the central valley of Chile, not to mention all of the spices, nuts, fish, cheeses, meats, household cleaning supplies, tools, and gadgets you could possibly ever need, all found at the cheapest prices in Santiago and open seven days a week, 365 days a year.

We enjoyed a traditional Chilean lunch at **Galindo**. Serving up quality meals since 1968, Galindo started as a canteen for local workmen. Today it draws artists and the young Bellavista crowd, who come for traditional Chilean fare in a bohemian atmosphere. Although it gets crowded, it's a great place to try traditional dishes like pastel de choclo or a hearty cazuela, a typical meat and vegetable soup.

The **Bahá'í Temple of**



Santiago's Metropolitan Cathedral is considered one of the finest examples of religious architecture in South America. Journal photos by David Sasser

South America (bahai.cl/templobahai) is located high above Santiago in the foothills of the Andes mountains. Nestled in the rolling topography of the mountains and surrounded by reflecting pools and a landscape of native grasses, this complex-curved temple of light acts as an invitation for spiritual contemplation and architectural pilgrimage. The last of eight continental Temples commissioned by the Bahá'í Community, its nine monumental glass veils frame an open and accessible worship space where up to 600 visitors can be accommodated. Looking up to the central oculus at the apex of the dome, visitors will experience a mesmerizing transfer of light from the exterior of cast glass to an interior of translucent Portuguese marble. At sunset, the light captured within the dome shifts from white to silver to ochre and purple.

Chile suffered from the same poverty as other South American countries in the 1960s. The long lines for bread and water, the civil turmoil. This led to political instability, the key moment being the 1973 coup d'état that saw the liberal president Salvador Allende killed and replaced by the violent military regime of General Augusto Pinochet. Chile suffered immensely during the years of the Pinochet dictatorship. Claims and protests against the dictatorship were increasing and in 1988 a referendum was called in which the citizens voted in favor of democratic elections. On March 11, 1990, Patricio Aylwin took office as the first democratic president after the coup d'état. However, the political regime continued with the presence of General Pinochet who was the chief of the Chilean Armed Forces until 1998.

In April 1990, the new



La Vega is a crowded, popular fruit and vegetable market with extensive arrays of vegetables and fruits grown in the central valley of Chile.

democratic government created the National Committee of Truth and Reconciliation which investigated the crimes committed during the dictatorship. Nearly 40,000 people were arrested, tortured or exiled, including more than 3,000 who were murdered or remain missing.

In an effort to reflect on the horrors of those years, the Chilean government founded El Museo de la Memoria y Los Derechos Humanos, or the **Museum of Memory and Human Rights** (mmdh.cl). The museum is sobering and a must when visiting Santiago, tracing the history of the Pinochet dictatorship from its origins through to its modern implications, commemorating the victims killed and abused during the regime. The three floors of the museum include video footage of detention centers, newspaper excerpts from the 1970s and 80s, and interactive photography and audio exhibits. Aside from educating the public through its exhibits, the museum also includes a comprehensive archive and documentation center which is open to the public.

We also stopped at **Londres 38** (londres38.cl), a memory site in Santiago where political prisoners were tortured and killed. During the dictatorship, the National Intelligence Directorate (DINA) used Londres 38 as a center for its operations.

A plaque outside of the build-

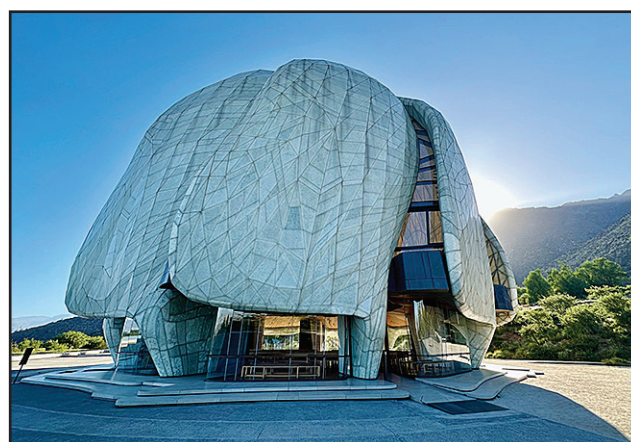
ing reads: "Secret Detention, Torture, Disappearance, and Killing Site. September 11, 1973 to 1975. In this place, 98 people – including two pregnant women – were disappeared, executed, or killed as a consequence of tortures. To hide these crimes, during the dictatorship the number 38 was replaced with 40. With mobilization and fighting it was obtained in 2005 and declared a historic monument. In 2008 the memorial was inaugurated, and since 2010 this site has been open to the community as a memory space."

The cobblestones on the street outside of Londres 38 have the names of individuals who were disappeared or lost their lives there. While we didn't have the opportunity to go inside, the site's exterior offers plenty of recognition and memorial for the heinous activities that occurred behind the closed doors of Pinochet's dictatorship.

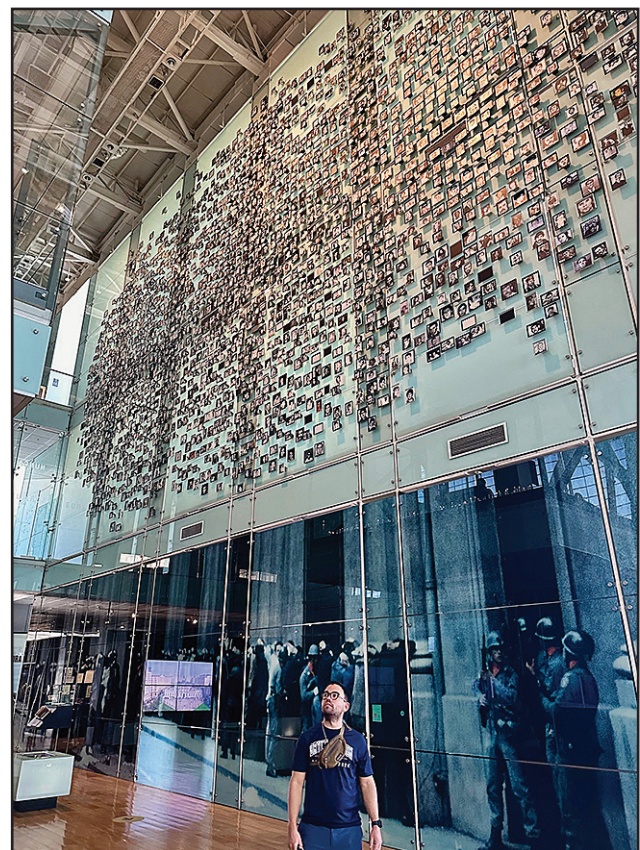
While Pinochet ruled harshly, he left behind one of the most successful countries in Latin America. He brought economic progress by deregulating the financial market and privatizing public organizations, which produced a sizable financial boom under his reign. But his rapid introduction of capitalism widened the gap between Chile's rich and poor. Chile remains the most competitive economy in Latin America, with low levels of corruption and an efficient government.



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The Museum of Memory and Human Rights traces the history of the Pinochet dictatorship, commemorating the victims killed and abused during the regime.



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