

# Valparaíso boasts colorful houses, streets and organized chaos

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

**By David Sasser**  
Journal Publisher

Valparaíso, or Valpo to the locals, is a maritime city overlooking Chile's Pacific coastline, about 90 minutes from the nation's capital, Santiago. It's known for its steep funiculars and colorful, cliff-top homes.

I had an amazing tour of Valpo with my guide, Julio Peraldi, of **Julio Private Tours**.

Known as the 'Jewel of the Pacific,' the city was founded in 1553 by Spanish conquistadors and has a history filled with references to pirate raids, debauchery, tragic fires and earthquakes.

Since Chile's independence from Spain in 1818, Valpo has been home to the country's naval base and one of its largest seaports. The city was the first and most important merchant port on the sea routes of the Pacific coast of South America that linked the Atlantic and Pacific oceans via the Strait of Magellan.

Valparaíso saw a huge boom in the 19th century thanks to its strategic position for Europeans who stopped there while refueling their ships en route to California during the Gold Rush. Immigrants from all over the world, particularly England, France and Germany, settled on its iconic hills.

The influence of these immigrants is highly reflected in the architecture and identity of the city. In fact, it's still regarded as one of the best examples of 19th-century architecture and urban development in Latin America, and was named a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2003.

The first thing visitors to Valpo are struck by are its distinctive colorful houses, making the view across the valley an explosive rainbow. This spectral tradition dates back to the 19th century when city dwellers would source any old leftover paint from the dockyard to slap on their homes to protect them from damage and weathering.

Homes were first developed on the steep surrounding hills, the most famous being **Cerro Alegre** and **Cerro Concepción**, providing the base for the city's unique amphithe-

ater like layout. Neighborhoods were built without any plans, and many streets still lack names, as people simply arrived and built homes where they pleased using aesthetics typical of their home countries. Adaptation to the environment led to a creative urban layout and made possible the building of unique homes and structures.

The completion of the railroad to and from Santiago in 1880 further transformed Valparaíso into a commercial center for the entire Pacific Coast, bringing the population to 100,000.

Between 1883 and 1916, around 30 funiculars, or ascensors, were constructed to connect the businesses of the lower town with the residential districts on the hills above. Many of these still survive and are officially listed as National Monuments, although not all of them are currently in service.

Constructed in 1883, **Concepción** is the oldest funicular in Valparaíso. It was built to connect the lower town with the British and German communities living on Cerro Concepción. Climbing over 225 feet at an angle of 45°, Concepción remains one of the city's most popular ascensors.

The **Artillería** funicular is one of the most photographed in the city. At the northern end of the UNESCO district, it was built to connect the lower town with the old Naval College, now the **Naval and Maritime Museum** on Cerro Artillería. Today its carriages continue to transport more than 30 passengers at a time to the top of Artillería, from where they are rewarded with fantastic views of the city and the bay.

The city took some hard hits in the early 1900s, causing a fairly severe economic downfall. In 1906, a major earthquake destroyed or damaged many of the downtown buildings, though some of the original architecture remains. The second economic blow to Valparaíso was the opening of the Panama Canal in 1914, which made it possible for European ships to avoid Valparaíso all together.

Internationally revered Nobel Prize winner **Pablo Neruda** was Chile's most beloved poet, politician, and a staunch campaigner for social

justice. His poem **Ode to Valparaíso** gives the reader a taste of the poet's mad love affair with the city. "Valparaíso, how absurd you are... you haven't combed your hair, you've never had time to get dressed, life has always surprised you." His house in Valparaíso, called **La Sebastiana**, remains one of the city's most visited tourist attractions.

**General Augusto Pinochet** was born in Valparaíso in 1915 and spent his school days in the city before attending military school in Santiago. He famously staged a coup d'état on September 11, 1973, and his violent dictatorship is synonymous with Chilean history.

Pinochet presided over a military regime that violated human rights, shut down political parties, canceled elections, constrained the press and trade unions, and engaged in other undemocratic actions during its more than 16 years of rule. It's estimated more than 3,000 people died on Pinochet's order by the time the regime ended and democracy returned in 1990 after overwhelming public protest.

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.

Pablo Neruda stood firmly against the military coup led by Pinochet, and within days of the coup, died in highly suspicious circumstances.

The military dictatorship banned all forms of political art, and anyone caught defying this repressive policy risked torture and death. Many saw art as the only way to express their beliefs, and Valparaíso was the perfect place for this. On its narrow and concealed streets and stairways, artists could do their work and get away unseen. An underground network of artists formed in the city, painting powerful messages on the walls of its back streets. Their murals were painted over when discovered by military police.

But the groups persisted and proliferated, and played an important role in returning democracy to Chile in 1990. Their work preserved hope, and emboldened activist groups to organize. After the downfall of the Pinochet regime and the return of democracy in Chile, Valparaíso's local government made street art legal in a move to celebrate freedom of expression. Everywhere



Valparaíso is regarded as one of the best examples of 19th-century architecture and urban development in Latin America. Journal photos by David Sasser

else in Chile, street art is only permitted under formal commissions.

You don't have to be a street art connoisseur to recognize the world-class quality of walls painted up on Valpo's hills and the city is an open-air art gallery.

Julio and I stopped at **Galería Espacio Rojo** ([rojogaleria.com](http://rojogaleria.com)), Miramar #175, a small gallery tucked in the city's colorful hills. Cristián Rojo spent 10 years transforming a 19th-century, sea-view manor into one of the best galleries to view works by Chile's emerging artists. And, the view of the city from the back of the gallery is incredible. There are beautiful paintings hanging alongside bold street art canvases. Cristián is an excellent ambassador for his city, and has a passion for the art. He told me some amazing stories about the artists, and this is a place to learn about Valpo's past and ponder its future.

Given its coastline stretches for almost 2,500 miles, it's not surprising one of Chile's main industries is fishing. Julio and I arrived early in the morning at **Caleta Portales**, Valparaíso's main fish market located in the east of the city, to witness the small boats unload their hauls. We wandered along the pier to find fishermen preparing their nets and selling fish. Buying directly from the fisherman, you have to purchase fish in multiples of six. Once you've made your purchase you can go to one of the stalls along the pier to have it cleaned and filleted. It's amazing to watch them work their magic with a knife before bagging up your freshly caught fish. Many also sell ceviche in small plastic pots.

Another attraction at Caleta Portales are the sea lions. You'll spot sea lions crowded around the pier and the rest of the port area. They even come up to the rocky beach in great numbers to lay in the sun.

**Café del Pintor**, Urriola 652, is located in the heart of Cerro Alegre and features a variety of tasty and affordable menus. The walls are covered from top to bottom with colorful artwork and hand-painted murals, adding



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an artistic flair to the café. The daily fixed priced lunch menu (\$15) is excellent, letting you choose an appetizer, entree, and dessert. I had the ensalada mixte (salad) appetizer and an entree of fresh reineta (white fish) with lemon sauce and mushroom risotto. The caramel mousse for dessert with a coffee was delicious.

If you want to try a local delicacy, check out **chorrilana**, a meat feast of minced beef and fried egg heaped on a plate of french fries. This Valparaíso staple is thought to date back to the 16th century.

A magnitude 8.8 earthquake struck Chile on February 27, 2010. The tsunami waves arrived within 15 minutes of the earthquake, and were not preceded by any evacuation warnings. At least 547 people were killed or missing, with about 12,000 additional people injured. Approximately 370,000 houses, 4,013 schools, 79 hospitals and 4,200 boats were damaged or destroyed by the earthquake and tsunami in the Valparaíso-Concepción-Temuco area, with at least 1.8 million people affected in the entire region. Coastal villages and fishing coves were destroyed along approximately 370 miles of coastline.

**Viña del Mar** is Valparaíso's neighbor to the north and a more laid-back, fashionable beach resort area. Originally founded in the late 1800s as a weekend retreat for the wealthy elite in Valparaíso

and Santiago, Viña del Mar has remained one of the top beach destinations for everyone living in Santiago ever since. Although you likely won't hear the full name of this town because most simply refer to it as "Viña".

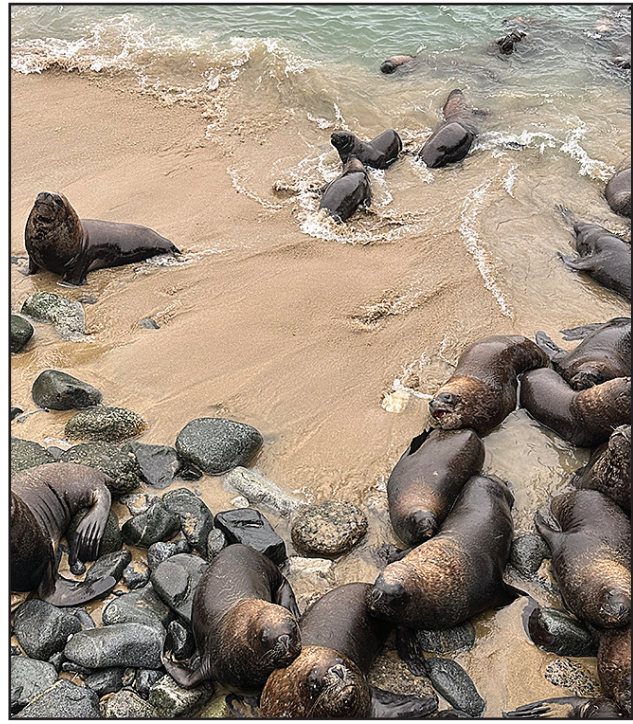
While Valparaíso boasts colorful streets and organized chaos, Viña has attractive homes, open spaces, manicured lawns, and beautiful beaches with colorful surfboards everywhere. Viña del Mar has plenty of museums, good restaurants, and open walkways to enjoy.

The **Fonck Museum**, 784, 4 Norte Street, has a large exhibition of pre-Columbian artifacts. Notable is the collection of the Rapa Nui culture, beginning with an authentic Moai located in the garden. It was brought to Viña del Mar in 1951. Along with those on display at the British Museum in London, these are the only moai outside of Easter Island. Until 1988, the Moai was installed in La Marina Avenue, when it is moved to its current location.

**Palacio Carrasco**, built by Emilio Carrasco in 1912, housed the municipal library until it was closed due to earthquake damage. Outside the entrance to Palacio Carrasco is a sculpture by Auguste Rodin called "**La Defensa**." The statue was commissioned by the Chilean government after the Pacific War (1879-1883) to commemorate fallen war heroes.



Fresh seafood is brought in every morning at Caleta Portales fish market and ranges from white fish, salmon, tuna, crab, and octopus.



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