

Chile in the Springtime
by Murray Forbes

Murray Forbes and his wife, Lavinia, are Canadian citizens who retired to Órgiva, Spain.

We live in dread that some authority will contact us to ask us not to travel anymore. Already we have friends who are arranging their travel plans around when we are not travelling. This time [October 2012], we conjured up mega-storm Sandy to fly out on and a general strike to arrive back in. None of these, in fact, derailed us; it was something much more stupid. Our flight from Madrid to Santiago came with a lengthy stopover in Atlanta. Living in Canada with Canadian passports, we have never, ever, thought about US visas or visa exemptions, and I had never heard of ESTA, the online visa exemption application. No problem with visas in Chile, but Canadians have to pay a retaliation fee to enter because the Canadian government, in its wisdom, is charging Chileans to enter Canada.

We had been persuaded by various friends that the way to go to the Madrid airport was to get a lift to the Granada bus station and take the bus to Madrid and two metros to the airport. Delta Airlines does a daily flight to New York and to Atlanta from Madrid, both leaving at roughly the same time. With Hurricane Sandy working its way from the West Indies to New York, the New York flight was in a state of wild confusion. No problem for us going to Atlanta.

It was at this point that things started to seriously unravel. No visa, no flight, but we could apparently get an ESTA exemption online or from a travel agent in the Madrid airport. A mile of corridor later, the travel agent did not open until 11:00, two hours after our flight was scheduled to depart, and in any event we found out later that it no longer did ESTAs. We tried online. All the commands on the snail-paced Internet slot machine at the airport work differently from anything I have ever used before and are unintuitive. Then the fatal trick question – “Where was the passport issued?” Well, mine was issued in the British Consulate in Madrid, as far as I know. Wrong answer; it has to be the same as one’s nationality. However, once the mistake was made the website would not let me correct it. I found another website which informed me that the official ESTA site was closed for maintenance. The third website slowly took in the information right to the step before last when the Internet machine ran out of money. It did not have a timer to help predict this. I then put a ridiculously large amount of money into the machine and started again. This time it took everything in without any trick questions at all and after the credit card data was taken informed me that I had been charged \$80 for the \$14 application and they would let me know within 48 hours whether it had been approved or not.

Time had run out, so I went to the ticket office, where there was a long queue of people with lengthy problems ahead of us. I have to say Delta Airlines were quite facilitating, but their flight to Atlanta on the next day was full so the best they could do for us was to put us on standby.

At this point we saw no alternative but to return to Órgiva to pick up our Canadian passports. Of course we had no car with us, so had to make a rapid retreat to the bus station. The plan after that got a bit vague but would probably have included driving through the night back to join the standby queue next day. No such luck. All the buses to

Granada were full until 4:00 p.m. We then went to Lavapiés [a neighbourhood in Madrid] on the metro for an Indian meal. Here too we chose badly. However, the restaurant had wifi so I checked my e-mail, only to find out that my ESTA had been approved after all. I hastily tried to apply for Lavinia and could get none of the sites to work. We then found an Internet café and applied from there. No problem taking my money, but there was no confirmation that the application was accepted. We struggled back to the hotel for another night. I then e-mailed the ESTA issuing company to point out that we needed the confirmation for a flight first thing next morning (Monday) and got a reply to the effect that they would look into the application during normal business hours – i.e., well after the flight was due to depart.

Next morning we arrived at the airport to see if they could route us through Iraq or Afghanistan or somewhere safe like that so as to escape the dangers of an in-transit in the US – not to mention the treatment once you are there. We joined the ticket-sorting-out line, where chaos connected with the storm about to hit the US Eastern seaboard was in full swing. At a strategic moment we were whisked out by Delta staff, who discovered that Lavinia's application had in fact been approved, and we were then diverted to our third queue – the one for standby passengers. Luckily paying passengers get to the front of the standby list, and by this and other miracles we arrived in Chile only a day late.

The bus into Santiago was very easy. We decided to walk from there to Plaza de Armas rather than struggle with two metros, and it was a pleasant walk in excellent weather. Our hostel was definitely studentesque and difficult to find but superbly located on the sixth floor of an old colonial building running the length of the Plaza and consisting mainly of dormitories. We had the only room with partially functioning bathroom en suite and a terrace overlooking the centre of Santiago, a comfortable and enormous bed, and more space than anyone needed – and cheap. Chile is not, however, and we ate badly and expensively in Santiago.

We spent the day doing a lot of walking around this pleasant city, including a walk up Cerro Santa Lucia, from where one has a magnificent view of the city and Andes. However, we had to take a taxi ride up Cerro San Cristobal, where the view was even better, because the funicular was under repair. It was superb spring weather. The only fly in the ointment was a series of impassioned evangelists preaching without pausing for breath over a PA system in the plaza by the cathedral under our bedroom window until late into the evening. Give me a muezzin any day. It was enough to make me convert to non-practising agnosticism.

The next day, with an eight-hour time difference, we wandered somewhat aimlessly in this nice but, as with all cities, polluted and busy place, visiting, amongst other sites, their magnificent central post office and the Supreme Court in a splendid old building.

We had made some impractical travel plans to San Alfonso, where the resort in which the Subud meeting was taking place is located. [Subud is an international spiritual movement that began in Indonesia in the 1920s. The name is an acronym that stands for three Javanese words of Sanskrit derivation: Susila Budhi Dharma – Ed.] There was a metro stop in front of our hotel, and with one change we got to the far outskirts of Santiago where a bus passed up the charming and much-visited Maipo Valley. In very little time we were in San José de Maipo's main and only square to wait for an Argentinean family to pick us up in their rental car. Five hours later they had not arrived,

and in fact we could easily have made our own way to the next village by bus, *collectivo* or taxi. Naturally our cellphone refused to find a system to roam with. Meanwhile, the Argentineans had their own challenges – a credit card blocked because they had not told the bank they were going out of Argentina, a sort of curbside deal with a somewhat dubious car rental person for US cash, and getting lost en route in the tangled maze of Santiago. An hour and a half after the latest we expected them, they arrived. This was fortuitous because we got on extremely well and spent quite a bit of time together at the meeting.

The resort itself was charming in every way. Our sort-of cabana, converted into an artistic but slightly impractical hobbit home, sat apart in calm and majesty with a gigantic window facing the huge mountains hovering above us and the Maipo river which runs through the property. To justify the \$200-a-night price tag (don't worry; we didn't pay anything like that), they had a king-and-a-half-sized bed constructed for a Sultan and his entire harem and a deluxe bathroom but lacking more mundane considerations such as places to put things. Our calm at a price was in fact a godsend, as the meeting managed to coincide with exceptional spring weather and a very long weekend – i.e., one that starts on Thursday with an absentee Friday embedded. All accommodation was totally booked. Magnificent place though it was, I get cage fever in these resorts, and it was terribly difficult to escape.

One afternoon we finally managed to hide our plastic wristbands and take a local bus up the valley. We had to wait forever for the bus, and while waiting got to chat with some students, one of whom came from Spain, trying to hitchhike back to Santiago. When the bus came, it deposited us to await another bus for which we had to wait another forever, finally arriving at San Gabriel, a godforsaken village hemmed in by gigantic mountains, in time to wait forever for the last return bus. I guess it had the merit of being lived in, unlike the manicured space we were staying at. We also found a first-class pasta restaurant on our return to San Alfonso.

At the gathering, the Subud groups had arranged an entertainment night. It was very good and included two older men playing and singing gaucho music very well and an Indian-looking couple with another lady playing South American Indian music. The Indian lady's voice was quite exceptional. There were many other worthy contributions as well and a lot of Spanish poetry and skits which I could not understand and a lady dancing tango rather well with a puppet man that she had created – the best sort, I am told, as they do what is directed and don't argue.

We had planned on heading north after day four to visit some of the beaches and the Atacama desert – the driest on earth. However, everyone we talked to told us to head south instead. In fact, we left a day late because our Argentinean friends offered to negotiate our taking over their rental wreck if we stayed an extra day and returned with them. Our friends negotiated an unbelievably good deal for us with the curbside car rental enterprise. True, the car refused to start and then conked out altogether on the side of the only highway, but this was a relatively late development, and the car took us many kilometres to all but the remotest ends of this long country before rebelling.

In 30-degree weather we headed our wreck out of Santiago airport in late afternoon and hit the one and only highway. It goes from Chiloé in the south up to Bolivia in the north over about 4,500 kilometres and is an excellent four-laned affair for which one pays vast sums in tolls every few kilometres but, other than that, gets one up

and down Chile with ease and speed. By late evening we found ourselves at Chillán, which is a largish sort of town in the fertile Central Valley, and maneuvered with difficulty into the centre (it was in fact even harder to get out of, as they were rebuilding the road without deviation signs). We had no difficulty finding a hotel right in the centre with parking, but throughout our trip we were shocked by the price of accommodation. There is certainly no economic crisis in Chile.

Next day we drove south all day through what they call their Lake District. All down the highway one sees the gigantic mountains and volcanoes on one's left, but the road is pretty level through the fertile plains. We went through enormous pine forests, some lovely rugged terrain, and all very green and lush. For us, however, it was the type of terrain, with the exception of the few volcanoes, that we are familiar with in Canada, so we were not totally overwhelmed.

We got a bit lost in Ancud, which had the slight advantage of giving us a glimpse of it because, by the time we had got to our hotel, a storm was in full swing. It was a totally charming hotel-cum-art gallery. Luckily, although heavily overcast and predicted to continue raining, it held off next morning long enough to allow us to stroll down to the little harbour, the market where we bought locally knitted Alpaca cardigans, and up and around the old village.

Given the weather predictions we thought that we had better make our way a bit further north as, beautiful though the island is, torrential rain would take some of the fun out of it. I ill-advisedly decided to take a coastal route back to the ferry, which turned out to be a very rough and muddy dirt road going on for ever, but also very pretty.

In much better although not totally sunny weather we bailed off the highway at Puerto Varas and made our way around the large and attractive Lago Llanquihue over which the snow-covered volcano Osorno majestically presides with its head in the clouds. The route took us right under it, and we rejoined the highway again at Osorno village.

From here we wanted to head for Pucón and Lago Caburgua but instead stopped at Villarica at a lovely bed and breakfast, run by two American ex-teachers, located on the top of a hill above the village with a terrific view over the lake and surrounding mountains and volcanoes. The gardens were landscaped exquisitely and, being spring, all in full bloom. We spent a most enjoyable evening here and ate an excellent dinner while chatting to an Australian couple of about our vintage and a slightly younger Texan couple connected with the US military.

Unfortunately our plans fell apart next day. By morning the storm had fully reached the Lake District and was predicted to stay there, and, glued to the Internet, we could not find anywhere to escape it. However, I had read my guidebook diligently, and there is a part of Chile where rainfall has never been recorded. We therefore drove straight north.

Lavinia had read about a thermal spa which was meant to be one of the early ones and very attractive and also had accommodation and a celebrated restaurant called Terma Cauquenes. As it was about Spanish lunchtime – 2 p.m. – we headed off the highway 50-odd kilometres to Cauquenes. It was a most interesting drive through, amongst other things, rice paddies, which we did not know existed in Chile. However, when we got to Cauquenes no one had heard of the spa. In this lively little village there was no sign of tourism at all. Eventually we found some workman who knew about the spa. It was not in

or anywhere near Cauquenes but some two or three hours further north up the highway near Rancagua.

By about 3 p.m. we managed to find a village eating place in Parral. It was not gourmet or even edible but, like O'Reilly, it was cheap. Suffering from acute over-driving syndrome, we arrived in Rancagua in the height of its rush hour and naturally got totally lost in its maze. Chilean road signage is modelled on the Spanish – that is to say, relies totally on local knowledge or gifted fifth sense. Eventually by constantly asking our way we managed to find ourselves behind a battalion of heavy laden trucks and buses creeping up a mountainside, and finally, in a most beautiful location wedged between mountains, there was this enormous building from the past. A sinking feeling progressed as we got closer. On a Friday night about an hour's drive from Santiago, this spa was not a well-kept secret. In spite of my initial instinct to do a U-turn and clear off as fast as possible, we did fight our way through the bedlam to the front desk while vanloads of people kept filtering past us and some chap banged away at top volume on a piano. The only time anyone was rude to us in Chile was when we asked the receptionist whether there was a room for the night. You would have thought he would at least have seen the humour in it – maybe for the following year.

There seemed no other possibility at this point than to return to the busy city of Rancagua and try and find somewhere there to stay. On our way out of the spa when we reached the Rancagua road two young men were standing at the bus stop waiting for a bus, so we offered them a lift. It turned out that they were the excellent cooks at the reputed restaurant, but that was as close as we got to sampling it. They, however, found us a less traumatic route into the city and plunked us in a rather nice and expensive four-star business hotel within striking distance of the highway, where we gratefully slept in unusual affluence in an enormous room on the sixth floor overlooking the whole city.

It was nice and sunny when we got going in the morning, and after a bit more exploring we headed north, taking in the choked stretch of highway through Santiago at a bumper-to-bumper crawl. As we approached the fine beach country, the clouds gathered. For an additional fee, we got to go through the tunnel with no light at the end of it, and eventually emerged claustrophobically through the mountains into light drizzle. The more we progressed north the worse it got, and by the time we pulled up at the charming village of Los Vilos for lunch, there were black clouds all over the mountains to our right but still no rain in the village.

We made our way down to the beach and by a process of blind guesswork (multiple choice – left or right) we found ourselves in a totally charming rocky cove with a string of seaside fish restaurants, each making vigorous attempts at our custom. We ended up picking one with people in it, only later to realize that the people were family of the restaurant owner, but the fish was out of this world and later a whole busload of Chilean school children arrived so it was amusingly lively. After eating we walked along the cove and came across a fisherman gutting and filleting his fish surrounded by all the neighbourhood dogs and a roofload of pelicans and seagulls waiting for the scraps.

As mentioned earlier, there comes a point working one's way north in Chile when rain is only an issue because it never happens. It was a fascinating drive through barren mountains with less and less of any type of growth. Initially one sees mangy patches of colourless scrub, but eventually there is just no growth whatsoever. Our guidebook described a fascinating phenomenon to be seen in Parque Nacional Fray Jorge 30 or so

kilometres off the highway, where a microclimate has produced a tropical rainforest. Apparently clouds form from the cold Humboldt Current and, as they are forced up, the mountains create this humid cloudforest. What the guidebook did not make clear was that one needed an all-terrain vehicle to get there. As we inched our way down the endless dirt road twisting up and down desiccated mountains we passed a couple of little villages which seemed to survive on nothing at all. When we eventually reached the park entrance the gatekeeper claimed in the nicest and most apologetic way that they were closing and that in any case our derelict Toyota would never make it through the 10 additional kilometres needed to reach the rainforest.

On our way back we came across a gaucho on a magnificent black horse and later saw a bunch of other horses of the same ilk. There were some goats and so I guess they can survive on minimal agriculture, but most of the wealth, which is significant, comes from mining – initially nitrates and silver and later copper. Maybe the villages are subsidized by mining relatives.

Finally we made our way to La Serena for the night but the horrors of off-highway driving finally sent the car into denial. It refused to start. Initially it was a partial refusal, eventually giving into coaxing and kind words, but later it was an out-and-out strike, but more on this later.

La Serena is a superb little city built on much mining wealth and therefore with mansions and cobbled streets and a lot of charm. We made our way to a cozy run-down little old colonial house on one of the back streets where our quilt was moulting feathers and we slept disguised as slaughtered chickens. The day-person was an excessively elderly tiny lady assisted by her equally elderly sister whose charm and welcome was blended with more than a passing dose of absentmindedness. It had been their family house and there were pictures of her very Spanish-looking father and very pretty Mapuche-looking mother shown in full wedding regalia of a previous era. We really enjoyed meeting the old ladies and we had a memorable stay in their dying hotel.

Things started to go seriously wrong again the next day when our disgruntled rented Tercel refused more and more adamantly to start. We had decided to drive up the beautiful Esqui Valley to Vicuña, which was indeed a spectacular drive passing a bright green lake on the way, but we had a rather difficult breakdown where we had to push the car out of traffic in Vicuña's square. The temptation to indulge the valley's specialty product – *pisco* sours – was quite strong but might not have solved the problem other than perceptually. We had intended to drive up to the Atacama desert and spend the next night in Copiapó, so decided to do this anyway.

We thought that maybe we would be able to use Copiapó as the launching point to one or other of the parks to see penguins and sea lions or go to the much-acclaimed beach of Bahía Inglesa. Copiapó itself reminded me of a Northern Ontario mining town: Everything is brought in and therefore expensive and all the wealth comes from minerals out of the ground. We, however, found an inexpensive student-oriented hostel on one of the back streets.

All our enquiries led us to the conclusion that, even functioning, our car would not be able to negotiate the many kilometres of dirt road to the various parks, and to round up or join a tour would take longer than we had available. Reluctantly we therefore decided not to push on next day the four hours further north to the Parque Nacional Pan de Azúcar, from where one can arrange a boat to the island where penguins might or

might not be. However, we thought that we might go and have a glance at Bahía Inglesa or alternatively head to Vallenar on the way back south and try and get to the [island] Reserva Nacional Pingüino de Humboldt.

All decisions, however, were made for us by our car. This time it totally declined all motion, to the point that the starter would not even turn over. We telephoned the car rental person, who had a string of complicated suggestions in Spanish, all of which would have eaten significantly into our vacation, and I was not at all confident that we would recoup our expenses. We only had two days to go and, once running, the car managed very well, so plan D was hastily agreed on. This involved getting some guests of the hotel to help us push the car to jump-start it and then beat it down the highway all the way to Valparaiso, where we would abandon it if it would not start and take the bus back to Santiago and the airport.

All went according to plan until we got to just outside of La Serena opposite a large gas station and truck stop, when the thing conked out and refused to restart. I wandered over to the gas attendant. Of course there was no mechanic, but a fellow filling his car overheard me and turned out to be a mechanic and came over and ascertained that the battery-connecting screw was missing and the car was not making contact with the battery. He did a temporary roadside fix that did not leave us with total confidence, but whatever he did solved the problem at least as far as Santiago airport when we handed it back. Chilean people are incredibly helpful and pleasant, and there was absolutely no suggestion of any payment for his inconvenience.

Plan D definitely seemed like the way to go. Then we were passing Los Vilos again at about lunch time and I needed fuel so we decided to try the local fish restaurant that we had noticed on the visit up. It was an inspired choice and the food was incredibly good – not to mention the wine. The sun was out, and all the spring flowers, and our little cove was truly a place to remain for the rest of our lives, but this time the car started without problem so back to the highway we went. There's spite for you – who said cars did not have souls!

At La Ligua we decided to take the coast road down to Valparaiso, which was much more attractive but heavily loaded with weekenders returning home on Sunday afternoon. At Cachagua we were tempted to call it quits and see if we could round up a boat trip to the penguin sanctuary on Isla de Pingüinos, but with the car being so unpredictable we thought it best to struggle through ever-increasing traffic.

Getting into Valparaiso was most challenging. Big-city drivers are not renowned for their patience but we eventually made a reasonably inspired turn, landing us in Plaza Echaurren in the dark without readable road names or any point of reference. Our first impression of this magnificent city was rather bleak. At night the place fills up with drunks and druggies and rowdy sailors and sleaze of all stripes. We got a few conflicting slurred directions in machine-gun Spanish and finally pulled the car up on Cochrane Street and walked to Plaza Victoria, where we found a café and located ourselves on our inadequate map. The hostel that we had decided on was a considerable walk further on, but it was not cold and we had been driving all day. It got grubbier and grubbier, and when we found the address of the hostel it had become a Jewish welfare centre. By now it was quite late to try and book into a hotel and we were getting seriously worried.

We decided that we needed to find the nearest hostel to where our car was and try and book in there. Hostel Caracol seemed to meet this description. What we did not

appreciate at the time was that it was straight up one of the many endless hills. We got to the brow of the hill, only to find that the hostel was about halfway down it on the other side. The hostel staff looked sort of quizzically at us as one would examine two fossils in a day nursery but decided that they did have a room available. Later we realized that we were definitely not the usual clientele, but we had some very enjoyable chats with the 20-something backpackers huddled in the kitchen. The choice was somewhat inspired partly because of its excellent location on a quiet, relatively undeveloped *cerro* [hill] with parking spaces on the vertical one-track road, and partly because it was very inexpensive.

Once daylight came, Valparaiso instantly became our favourite city in Chile, and we spent the next day and a half exploring every square inch that we could. Some of the *cerros* have lifts on rails to get you up, and some of them you have to walk, but they are charming beyond words in a rundown sort of way. Houses and streets are covered in very interesting and talented murals, and even the graffiti is artistic. The little wooden houses, some in quite a bad state of repair, are brightly coloured and great fun. Our general impression of Chile was an extension of the USA, and it is certainly a developed nation, but Valparaiso has remained South American. The streets are lined with street merchants selling everything from delicious-looking street food to pieces of cars and in fact anything. A few areas have become developed for tourism but even this they have managed to do with taste, retaining the spirit of the locations. The pokey little cafés and restaurants, while bearing quaint tourist-enticing trappings, are totally Chilean and artistic and attractive. On one occasion we found ourselves in front of an art gallery overlooking the harbour on the top of Cerro Concepción, which is about the most tourist-developed of the hills, and were able to have coffee on the balcony overlooking their lovely gardens and the harbour. At lunchtime we totally lucked in and had the best meal of our trip by complete chance.

Lavinia had read of a French restaurant perched, naturally, on the top of one of these strenuous mountains, and we staggered up it only to find the thing was closed. It was very much lunchtime, even by Spanish standards, so we walked at random down the first alley – Dimalow Street – where we saw what looked like the outside of a colonial house overlooking the bay which advertised a quite nice-sounding *menu del dia*. Once inside, we realized our find. The room was a delight, with old beams and rugged walls. The clientele were middle-aged, mainly business, folks, with some tables of women only. It was elegantly Chilean and they looked at us oddly when we intruded in our travelling clothes. Amongst the exquisitely presented food was a steak to die for about three inches thick with a delicious sauce, not to mention the house wine, which in any event is always very good in Chile.

Our plane did not leave until the next evening, and I had arranged to get the car to the airport for 7 p.m. This left us plenty of time during the day to explore more. We decided we would drive down the coast to Quintay, which is a charming little seaside cove with excellent seafood. Apart from the fuel gauge jumping from two bars to empty in one fell swoop, leaving us in panic mode until we could limp into a gas station, the car behaved. We spent a very pleasant afternoon, first watching the fishermen come in with and gut their catches while we ate in a restaurant overlooking the cove. Later we walked, without anyone in sight, down three or four kilometres of golden sand beach and back, and then along a path through spring flowers under fishermen's houses perched on top of the rocks.

The trip back took much less time than Google Maps suggested, so we pulled up at a café en route and sat in the sun for a while before making our way to the airport. We were greeted amicably by our curbside car renter, who was relieved that we had not bought a replacement battery as he had suggested because he claimed to have no money to reimburse us – which is what I had suspected.

The flight back was brutal. We went 10 hours overnight to Atlanta, where we had a 13-hour stopover. Then another long overnight flight to Madrid, arriving the morning after the general strike in Spain and not knowing whether the buses to Granada would be running. I had booked us on the 2 p.m. bus to allow for any delays en route, but in fact everything went smoothly and we ended up with three more hours of waiting at the bus station. Five more hours in the bus and we eventually arrived in Granada dirty and travel-worn. It was good to be home.