

GEOFF'S LATIN AMERICAN JOURNEY, NOV 2014

Santiago , Chile(first stay)

My trip started after a long-haul flight Sydney–Auckland–Santiago, with LAN–Chile in business class ... flight itself was comfortable with good service, but started with Sydney airport check-in a shambles with many LAN–Chile computer terminals out of action causing a 70-minute delay before a rush to board on time.

In Santiago airport there was an apparent lack of anyone waiting as expected with a transit service so I went to hotel (Hotel Gen Suites in metropolitan area) by taxi at Chilean pesos 19,000 (\$A 22 sounds better?) (they later called to claim they'd been at airport waiting for me – but if so, not visibly)

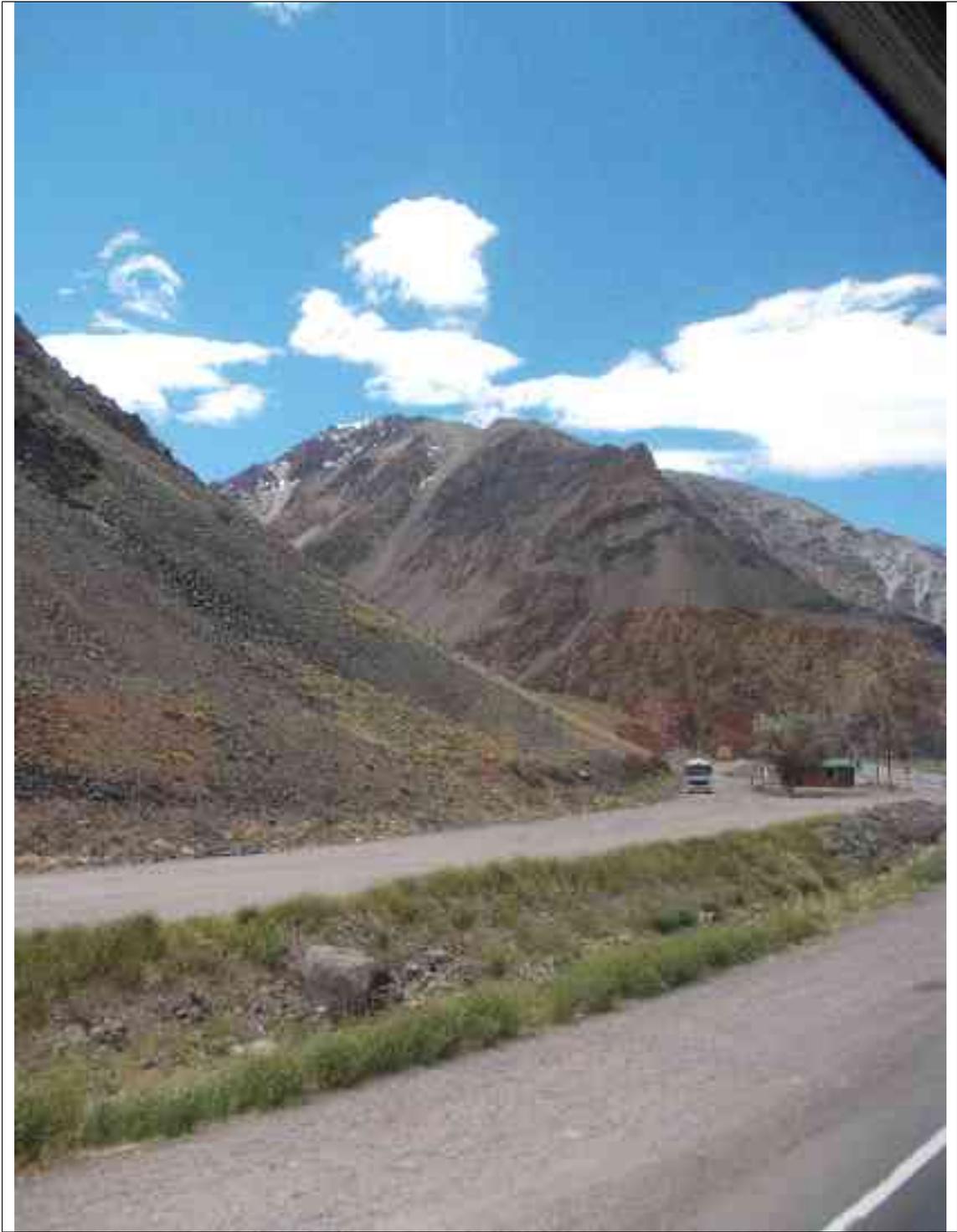
I stayed in this city for an initial two nights before the Peregrine tour started, joining its bus across the Andes. During this waiting time the tour package included a chauffeured city tour with a charming guide who (with good English) showed us the old city quarter, including banks, a stock exchange and a winery visit (below)
City population of Santiago is about 5.4 million, out of 17 million total for Chile, indicating highly centralized nature of this country

Old city areas ... a morning tour (with guide & driver) to old central business district of Santiago, with stock exchange, banks, many cafes and restaurants ... and also drive to some of higher hills in city for lookouts.

Wineries tour ... half-day visit to *Concha y Toro* winery to sample various reds including cabernet sauvignon (<http://www.viator.com/Santiago-attractions/Concha-y-Toro-Winery/d713-a1348>)

On my third day we started our bus journey across the Andes to Mendoza in Argentina – bus seats were comfortable although needed to be for the road ahead.

Aconcagua (Spanish pronunciation: [\[akon'kaywa\]](#)) is the [highest mountain](#) in the Andes and also both the [Western](#) and [Southern Hemispheres](#) at 6,961 metres. The summit is also located 15 km from the international border with [Chile](#). It is located 112 kilometres northwest of the [city of Mendoza](#), across the border in Argentina



Mendoza is 181 km (straight-line direct) from Santiago but the bus trip across the Andes takes six hours, with delays due to the multi-curved road cut out of the mountain granite; also sometimes queues of up to 20 truck-trailer combinations, with few places to pull over; and finally the Argentine border post where processing is neither friendly nor quick: we queued to obtain our entry visas – then we then had to take all bags off the bus, open for inspection then reload them – twice! However the mountain scenes enroute before that are dramatic, with water cascading down some of the peaks despite being the dry season. Some peaks were fitted with water pipes all the way down to feed small hydro-electric generators. We also saw ski lifts on the Chilean side, where this sport is popular in their winters.



(small-scale hydro:

Mendoza (pop 115,000) is the provincial capital of the Argentinian province of the same name, and is 1037 km from the national capital Buenos Aires. After arrival we checked into an inner-city hotel. We found it a pleasant city with avenues of northern trees, maintained regularly via stormwater drains beside the footpaths, making a cool atmosphere. Leafy avenues with many street-side cafes. It is also one of the main centres of the Argentine wine industry with malbec (red) wine in large production. (also see: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mendoza,_Argentina#Transandine_Railway) Before departing, we enjoyed a very good (late) evening meal at the steak house and wine cellar 'Ocho Cepas' (Eight Vines) – at which all food and drinks were covered by the tour package. (See more at FB page: <https://www.facebook.com/ochocepas>)

After two nights in Mendoza, we then took an Aerolineas Argentinas flight across to

Buenos Aires (in a not very new 737) ... parts of this trip were extremely bumpy, with our having to cling onto any nearby seat-tops to remain seated!

On arrival in Buenos Aires, we then transferred with our baggage to a hired bus, in which we travelled 70 km out into a rural area, for two nights at a resort named *Estancia Monte Viejo* near a country town named Brandsen within the Buenos Aires province. This is in a lush landscape – although then recently flooded by unseasonal rains. See reviews: https://www.facebook.com/EstanciaMonteViejo/app_254084314702229



(dining room : *Estancia Monte Viejo*)

Service (including room wifi) and food were excellent, meals including massive barbecued steaks, of which I could get through only 20 percent. There are horses available for guests who wish to ride – and our activities included making our own *empanadas*, starting from flour and water! However one unexpected flaw in this venue was that it runs its own power generation, which shuts off every night quite early ... so personal torches are needed!



barbeque for lunch ... no problem with size of steaks !

Buenos Aires

On our last night in Argentina our group (as part of the tour package) attended “*Madero Tango*” a theatre–restaurant located in the Puerto Madero old waterside area.
(see : <http://www.maderotango.com/>)

It is devoted to the tango, and after a good–quality meal we watched an impressive and exciting show which went on non–stop till about 2 am. They had 8 principal dancers including many beautiful girls – whose work was breathtaking, together with a band of about ten players (piano, two violins, two bandoleon, plus string bass. Also male and female singers who wove the show together with their singing talents. In one highlight they did a Spanish–language version of ‘Don’t Cry for me Argentina’ which was very powerful and moving.

Casa Rosada (pink house) – presidential palace in Buenos Aires, site of many protests over the years. Not residence of president Kirchner, she uses it for official functions only



Peregrine tour group – last night, at Madero Tango. (who also provided each of us with a

souvenir DVD). Our guide Federico at top right, is standing next to some of dancers. Group members by nationality were 3 Australian, 4 British, 4 Canadian and who all got along quite well, sharing a liking for red wine!

Next morning the tour ended, members then dispersing to other destinations – or to return home.

My plan was for another 4 days back in Chile.

My return flight BA–Santiago started with usual disorganisation by ground LATam (LAN–Chile local) staff : passengers all checked in and waited up to and after the scheduled departure time, with NIL p.a. announcements about when it would go, nor any apology for delay!

Eventually boarding about 40 minutes behind schedule!

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Back to Santiago:

Walking to explore the area of the Hotel Gen, the street (Avenida Portugal) had on one side a number of undertaker & funeral firms; also the Catholic University; and the main public hospital. Such health services are free in Chile, but very centralized – and the kerb outside the hospital was scattered with mattresses for people sleeping outdoors while waiting on appointments, presumably because many travel from other/remote parts of Chile and cannot afford to pay for any available accommodation.

Visited the upmarket retail/mall area of the Parque Arauco centre, Avenida Presidente Kennedy 5413, in the eastern Las Condes district. This is massive, stylish, and expensive – very upmarket foreign brands (and prices) – but I was also surprised to find there a Boost Juice Bar, one small outpost of the Australian–based chain.

The National Museum of Fine Arts in Casilla faces the Parque Forestal. It is a neo–romantic style building (like most historic buildings in Latin America), with a large collection featuring portraits of governors, presidents and various notables from both the Spanish colonial (1541–1818) and independent republican phases of Chilean history. (see: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chilean_National_Museum_of_Fine_Arts)

Although interesting within my limited knowledge of Chilean history, by comparison the colonial portrait quality did not match that from the Dutch East Indies, by court portraitists as seen at the Old Batavia Museum in Jakarta in the mid 1970s, e.g. of governor Anthoonij van Dieman and his wife Maria van Dieman.

One last local tour was a minibus day trip to Vina del Mar and the historic port of Valparaiso (which also shares with Santiago some functions of a national capital – a change made in the Pinochet regime, but since continued.

Vina del Mar is now a pleasant beachside town – popular for holiday apartments used by Santiago city people (those who can afford them).

Vina del Mar : *Palacio Vergara* (former governors' palace)



Valparaiso is a handsome port city, important to international trade into the Pacific late in the 19th century until the 1914 opening of the Panama Canal. It is still actively used for local South American and general export/import trade for Chile.



(hillside street in port area, Valparaiso ...)



Older shipping/agency buildings, e.g. on left, *Compania Chilena de Navegacion Interoceanica*

From its earlier trading days many suburbs were settled by English, German, or other shipping or trading people with street names reflecting this cosmopolitan history. Valparaiso is also now an active arts centre, resided in by many artists and writers since the return to democracy after the Pinochet regime's end in 1990.
(<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Valparaiso>)

Overall I found the trip went well, service standards variable (wifi access OK in most hotel rooms) – but the Peregrine Tour leader (Federico Pozzetti) was well organized and helpful, with a good sense of humour – his home is Mendoza, and (like many Argentines) he has Italian family ancestry.

I found this two-week journey interesting, although tiring from some “city walks” where some (Canadian) members of our group felt the need to sprint! One aim I failed to achieve was to locate and listen to local classical guitar players, schools, and performances – which I know exist in Chile, but my limited research failed to find them. We heard some music enroute (such as tango), but mainly in the line of tourist entertainment, such as folk music etc.

Chile is continuing a steady growth path (unlike Argentina), its peso about double the value of its neighbour's – and it has a comfortable middle-class feel like Australia, with similarly aged cars and other signs of prosperity. It has become Latin America's success story.

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ref: 2014-11-LAM