

Patagonia Tales

By Lisa Mitchell

Words: 2344

FROM THE weathered deck of a cosy hostel in Pucón, we adore Volcán Villarrica, all 2847 snowcapped and smouldering metres of her. She is the startling reminder that Pucón is the gateway to the Andes and the adventure capital of this continental edge, 10 hours south of Santiago by bus.

Like Queenstown in New Zealand, Pucón has developed a reputation as an escape destination to relax or `exercise' demons. There's hiking, climbing, mountain biking and white water rafting and though Chile's tourism industry longs to prosper, its charm lies in its unrefined approach. Tour operators don't fuss with the formalities of company disclaimers and safety procedures. Climbing Villarrica, for example, is hardly suitable for the inexperienced, but your first clue to that is when the tour guide hands you an ice axe, crampons and a gas mask without instruction.

I barely manage the ascent of cutting pumice scree and a death march up an icy snow wall. Up top is an asphyxiating welcome by sulphur fumes bubbling from Villarrica's crater, and a grand view. I skip the view and dive for the gas mask. A speedy descent along natural ice slides is barely slowed by the ice-axe, which leaves most of us wrenched of ligament for days. This is an adventure in the honest sense of the word; an uncomfortable, perilous and exhausting activity that is not so much enjoyable as it is memorable and impressive to retell having survived it.

In Pucón, dogs have right of way, as they used to, I recall, in '70s suburban Australia before gridlock and local laws hampered their freedom to roam. They wander the streets in friendly packs, stopping traffic to cross the road and block high street pavements where they enjoy the midday sun in companionable clumps. By night, they socialise openly across the hilly towns, their chatter unhampered by owners with kinder hearts than us.

We amble around Pucón's wide streets lined with small weatherboard homes and rambling gardens. We stop for jam in a café - the crepe is somewhere underneath - and a cup of coffee that comes with everything `on the side', including the coffee. We find a snug-looking pizza restaurant for dinner that serves White Russians (wasn't that the '80s?) and an upmarket arcade with shops that close during tourist hours. On rare occasions, you score an English subtitled menu and wish you hadn't. "Poor eel" and "chicken in a gas cooker" look far more tempting in Spanish.

At the west end of town, a jetty juts into La Poza, a huge inlet flanked by mountains and ideal for swimming or canoeing into tranquil distance. Here, the five-star tourists recline in recently constructed A-frame hotels that creep upon its black-pebble beach. It is Christmas Eve, a lively time for locals who spruce up their hotels and eateries for the high season ahead. At night, hymns travel across town and a nativity play entertains in the street. Families wander together, eating ice cream in the twilight warmth. There was a time when Christmas meant more than

consumer frenzy and frayed tempers and it's comforting to know it still lingers here.

FIVE weeks in Chile transports me back to a 1975 childhood when old cars pattered and grocers and fishmongers were plenty, when cluttered milk bars carried toys and paper-wrapped lollies and families went to church together. It is safe to walk the streets, day or night, the "Salon de Bellezza" uses hair curlers and everyone wears daggy clothes because chic doesn't exist, but general stores still do. The Laundromat is a new convenience and women still take in washing and lodgers for extra cash.

In Chile, chicken still tastes like chicken. They call it "Super Pollo" and sell it from the supermarket deep freeze in industrial strength plastic bags. It looks like a strangled yellow limb preserved in formaldehyde. They don't bleach it beyond recognition and flavour as we do and a little chook disease never hurt anybody there, nor me.

The other salient reminder of 1975, when I was 10, is that nobody, but nobody here, speaks my language. I ask for a toffee apple, I am given a healthy orange. I realise now that my crash course in Spanish two months prior to departure might only come in handy at the scene of a crime ("Yes officer, he is brown hair and brown eyes. He has short and fat. He dresses a blue shirt.").

Blessedly, Chile is a Catholic country of harmless short people whose reputation for evil only extends to petty crime in the top tourist destinations we plan to avoid (La Serena, Viña del Mar and Valparaíso). The notable exception to nostalgic familiarity is the ubiquitous "farmacia" or pharmacy that dispenses pills in the scoop 'n bag style of cinema candy bars. This apparent addiction to medication is second only to the Chilean dependence on "papas fritas" or hot chips, which are delicious and served with every meal.

On Christmas Day, and because my muscles have seized overnight from the exertions of Villarrica, Jason decides we should go hiking again. Mother of Mary, how are we to find a lift in a country that still observes sacred holidays? But the angels provide and obliging locals find a taxi driver happy to take us, so long as he can bring his girlfriend and be home in time for dinner. They court in the car while we take a rigorous three-hour 'walk' in nearby Huerquehue National Park to Largo Verde. We sit in a sun-dappled forest and picnic by deep emerald waters, happy to be in this glorious place so far from the chaotic gift, gab and gob stuffing that passes for Christmas back home.

OUR ITINERARY from Pucón is to head south by bus to the hub of Osorno where travellers splinter off to lake resorts, national parks, the Andes and Argentina (specifically, Bariloche, the chocolate town). Our 'ejecutivo' or luxury bus has big windows, broken seats, Braveheart on video and a boxed lunch of dry goodies that parch even the most savoury palette. We plan to visit nearby Puyehue National Park and then head to the west coast, which is never very far in this string bean country, to Puerto Montt. There, we will take the famous Chilean fjord cruise south to the port town of Puerto Natales which is the closest to Patagonia's jewel,

the Torres Del Paine national park. From there, it's a final bus to Chile's southern most airport in Punta Arenas to fly back to Santiago.

The Puyehue park traverse (about an hour and a half's drive east of Osorno in Guardería Anticura), turns out to be hard-core trekking through an extraordinary moonscape of volcanic plains that rival the best Hollywood set designs. The desertscape appears endless and natural hot springs by sand dunes create a starry Arabian night. It is an exotic trip for anyone game to navigate the 20cm-high sticks set kilometres apart that pass for 'trail markers'. We experience, four days of biting horseflies shaped like B-52s, knee-high bog and confusing trails that lose us for hours. Ahh, adventure.

Eventually, the park spits us onto a dirt road that meanders through idyllic farmlands where meadows brim with wild flowers and fat cows with bells munch by a gushing river. We manage to hitch a ride to the nearest bus stop 7kms away in Riñinahue, a one-store village with an imposing military presence. No sooner have we arrived than six uniformed and mounted "carabineros" pass by to inspect the dirty stragglers and demand our passports. "Si", they say, there is a local bus due any moment (in four hours) to escort us back to Osorno.

From Osorno, we take another local bus that teeters along the edge of a pretty coastal road toward Puerto Montt. It is New Year's Eve and each rocky driveway has a family of freshly scrubbed Chileans in their Sunday finest, off to celebrate with nearby friends. Arms are full of children and food, but it takes hours to progress as we inch forward in increments to pick up the party goers and their well behaved chickens and sheep.

To arrive in Puerto Montt at 10.30pm on New Year's Eve seems disastrous but an hour later, our convivial bed and breakfast hosts have us showered and in town in time for a four-course meal. Eating late is the norm in Chile, which enjoys the midday siesta. At midnight, the waiter scoops me from my chair in an embrace, the French businessman in the corner sheds a tear but accepts a hug, and the wealthy Argentinians at the next table welcome me as an exotic addition to this homeless gathering.

It's the best New Year's Eve we've ever had, we decide, as we saunter home at 1am along deserted streets. The doof doof of a discotheque wafts from the back end of town. So, Chile is not entirely the Land of Warm Milk and Arrowroot Biscuits after all. Teenagers are still allowed to be teenagers.

By day, Puerto Montt is a rambling town of vegetable markets and cluttered stores. A taste of German immigrants to the area in the mid 19th century remains in swanky Bavarian restaurants along the esplanade. Next the wharves, fishermen's wives usher my blonde, blue-eyed companion to a table with plastic flowers to flirt and try the regional dish of Curanto, a risky fruits of the sea affair in broth. Afterwards, we wind up steep, narrow streets to discover Chile's upper middle class in Brady-bunch homes. At the other end of town, splintered timber shanties with shingled rooves are blessed with rose gardens planted, it seems, to defy the gloom of hardship.

Most visit Puerto Montt only long enough to board the famed Chilean Fjord 'cruise' for which the tourist industry relies on the stinky damp services of the Puerto Eden ferry. The "económica" accommodation below deck is cramped and choking with

diesel fumes but one vociferous five-star tourist assures us his 'ejecutivo' cabin is no better. Those who have completed the passage in more temperate weather assure me it rivals Alaska's Inside Passage, but we see nothing in the grey mists that prevail on our four-day journey south. Worse still, I succumb, along with everyone else, to the heaving Golfo de Penas crossing that turns the boat green and leaves the corridors and bathrooms slick with discarded dinners.

We arrive at Puerto Natales, which appears to the impatient eye as a godforsaken port, but it offers a windswept beauty and powerful skylines that plume smoky blue or flatten to impenetrable slabs of slate. As the sun breaks through the high cumulus of this Renaissance painting, you stop to search for dangling cherubs. On another day, the afternoon sun blinds in golden sheets on rain-slick streets. Beauty aside, the main attraction is the Tabaret-style 'casino'. Two hour's drive north of here is the town's lifeblood, the Parque Nacional Torres Del Paine (Towers of Paine). Ahhh, "Paine"; must be an adventure ahead.

The park offers hiking for reasonably experienced to seasoned hikers and a stupendous landscape. At 7am on a hot summer's morning, we reach the holy grail - 2000m high granite spires of the Torres emerge from a searing white glacier base that melts in vanilla streaks down a malt-coloured rock face, into a pool of flawless reflection. It makes for one surreal Rorschachs blot. Deeper in the park, I spend hours gaping at the violent peaks of Los Cuernos with their jagged black-shale caps, and at sunset, ponder the softest cappuccino swirls of pearl pink and pale orange cloud. Patagonia's dynamic landscape seems to move mountains and definitely shifts my soul.

After a solid day's trek, I reach the crest of a hill, too chilled by glacial winds to appreciate fully the deeply-fractured, 17km long, Ventisquero Grey glacier. Its 200m-high wall of aqua ice calves, regularly, into the ice-green waters of Lago Grey. At night, we snuggle deep into our sleeping bags and listen to Grey's clinking icebergs from our camp. The next day, we battle the notorious Patagonian winds that bully you, like an invisible rogue, from side to side down the narrow rocky tracks.

For 10 days we wander and savour this forbidding terrain. The people drawn to this extraordinary landscape are as fascinating. Mr Safari Suit, the aristocrat, speaks of his grandfather, the first man to bring sheep into Chile from the Falkland Islands. Eduardo, the Columbian playboy, regales with tall trekking tales but rumour has it his splinted ankle came to disgrace on a rocky path, rather than a vertical ice climb. A local mountaineer and guide, 34 year-old Rodrigo, sits quietly. With his eyes always trained on some far-away scape, he shares the wonders of the Andean range. He tells me about the "ice mushrooms", found in few places outside Patagonia, that form on the highest peaks. The winds here are so fierce and chill that any moisture within them freezes directly onto the summit, forming a permanent ice cap.

Safely back in Puerto Natales, where fresh empanadas line the shelves of musty shops and the town-park topiarist shaves Cyprus trees into weird, bumpy balls, we head to a seafood restaurant that looks like a Golden Chain Inn. Our waiter appears wearing a wide-lapelled, powder blue vest and carrying old fashioned notions of customer service. "Is the calamari good?" I ask.

"Siiiiiiiiiii, es bueno!"

From his baritone chuckle, I can tell that our waiter swears it on the Holy Bible, and on his mother's grave, too.

As I munch on the tender trumpets of calamari in lacy batter, I listen to the Spanish chatter and bathe in my own happiness. We have had many adventures on this trip, already coloured by the romance of retrospect and embellished for storytelling. One thing I do know; in this restaurant with its vinyl chairs and red-paper napkins, in this strangely familiar country to the right of my own, I have made peace with the child inside who remembers a quieter time in life, when simple pleasures were the things that satisfied most.

More information on Lisa Mitchell's writing at lisamitchell.net.au