

# Chile

## HIGHLIGHTS

- **Torres del Paine** (p484) Break a sweat trekking to these rugged spires lordng above the Patagonian steppe.
- **Central Valley** (p399) Swirl, sniff and sip your way through Chile's best vineyards on a sunny wine-country retreat.
- **Valparaíso** (p400) Wander the steep passageways decked in urban art in the hills of this bohemian port.
- **Atacama Desert** (p421) Drink in the wild starscape above the driest desert in the world.
- **Off the Beaten Track** (p464) Encounter penguins, misty seascapes and mythical lore on the archipelago of Chiloé.
- **Best Journey** (see boxed texts, p473 and p461) Discover the luxuriant pace of life while riding through Patagonia's stunning back roads and river valleys.

## FAST FACTS

- **Area:** 748,800 sq km land, 8150 sq km water, 6435km of coastline
- **Budget:** US\$36 to US\$55 a day
- **Capital:** Santiago
- **Costs:** dorm US\$15 to US\$18, set lunch US\$6 to US\$11, national park entrance fee free to US\$28
- **Country code:** ☎ 56
- **Languages:** Spanish, Mapudungun, Rapanui
- **Money:** US\$1 = CH\$550 (Chilean pesos)
- **Population:** 16.8 million
- **Seasons:** high (December to February), low (March to November)
- **Time:** GMT minus four hours (minus three hours in summer)



## TRAVEL HINTS

Order the *menú del día* (inexpensive set meal) instead of off the menu. Budget extra travel days in rural Patagonia, where infrequent transportation can strand you in towns a day or two.

## OVERLAND ROUTES

Crossings include Tacna (Peru); Ollagüe and Colchane (Bolivia); and Paso Jama, Puente del Inca, San Martín de los Andes, Junín de los Andes, Villa La Angostura, Trevelin, Los Antiguos, Río Turbio and Río Gallegos (Argentina).

Spindly Chile stretches 4300km – over half the continent – from the driest desert in the world to massive glacial fields. Filling up the in-between are volcanoes, geysers, beaches, lakes, rivers, steppe and countless islands. Slenderness gives Chile the intimacy of a backyard (albeit one fenced between the Andes and the Pacific). What's on offer? Everything. With easy infrastructure, spectacular sights and hospitable hosts, the hardest part is choosing an itinerary. Consider the sweeping desert solitude, craggy Andean summits and the lush forests of the fjords. Rapa Nui (Easter Island) and the isolated Isla Robinson Crusoe offer extracontinental exploits. But don't forget that Chile is as much about character as it is setting. Its far-flung location fires the imagination and has been known to make poets out of barmen, dreamers out of presidents and friends out of strangers. A few wrong turns and detours and you too will be part of this tightly woven family who barbecues on Sunday. Don't forget to bring an extra bottle of red to the long, lazy dinners that await.

## CURRENT EVENTS

When the world economic crisis spread to Latin America, Chile proved surprisingly resilient. You could even say it's been schooling the superpowers-that-be, with a national deficit that is almost nonexistent. As if expecting this rainy day, President Michelle Bachelet's administration had tucked away over 20 billion US dollars from copper earnings. So now Chile is weathering the bad times by investing in public works projects to boost employment and morale. In the meanwhile, Chile will weather the downturn in tourism well, with fewer crowds and some deals, though Región X is paying dearly for the health crisis that nearly collapsed its massive salmon industry. Presidential elections were to come at the end of 2009. Pundits were predicting change, since the Concertación, the ruling center-left coalition hoarding power since Pinochet's fall two decades ago, had grown stale and corrupt in the eyes of the public. The center-right Alianza por Chile was well positioned to grab power – voters were already leaning toward conservative candidate Sebastián Piñera, a wealthy businessman.

## HISTORY

### Early History

The discovery of a single 12,500-year-old footprint in Monte Verde, near Puerto Montt, marks Chile's earliest tangible roots. In the north, Aymara and Atacameño farmers and herders predated the Inca. Other early peoples include the El Molle and the Tiwanaku, who left their mark with geoglyphs; Changó fisher folk on the northern coast; and Diaguita who inhabited inland river valleys.

Shifting cultivators from the southern forests, the Mapuche were the only indigenous group to successfully hold off Inca domination.

Meanwhile the Cunco fished and farmed Chiloé and the mainland. In the south, groups such as Selk'nam and Yaghan long avoided contact with Europeans, who would eventually bring them to the brink of extinction.

### Colonial Times

Conquistador Pedro de Valdivia and his men crossed the harsh Atacama Desert to found Santiago in the fertile Mapocho valley in 1541. They set up the famous *encomiendas*: forced labor systems exploiting the north's relatively large, sedentary population. In the south there was no such assimilation – the Mapuche fought European colonization for over three centuries. When the *encomiendas* lost value, agricultural haciendas or *fundos* (farms), run by South American-born Spanish took their place. These *latifundios* (estates) became the dominant force in Chilean society with many remaining intact into the 1960s.

### Revolutionary Wars & the Early Republic

Spain's trade control over the Viceroy of Peru provoked discontent among the colonies. Independence movements swept South America, with Argentine José de San Martín liberating Santiago in 1818. Under San Martín's tutelage, Chilean Bernardo O'Higgins, the illegitimate son of an Irishman, became 'supreme director' of the Chilean republic.

O'Higgins dominated politics for five years after independence, decreeing political, social, religious and educational reforms, but landowners' objections to these egalitarian measures forced his resignation. Businessman Diego Portales, spokesman for landowners, became de facto dictator until his execution in 1837. His custom-drawn constitution centralized power in Santiago and established Catholicism as the state religion.