

Introduction

29 September 2014.

Most people know what a Banana Republic is, especially as one San Francisco retailer has adopted that name as its own: The Banana Republic. A Banana Republic refers to the political and social instability and corruption of countries where it just so happens that they grow bananas, like Ecuador. In such countries, the president or dictator usually leave offices in a helicopter, one step ahead of the raging mob.

Woody Allen made fun of Banana Republics in his movie “Bananas,” in which he plays the dictator of a Banana Republic. But Chile is not a Banana Republic. It is far more stable and has working political institutions. Plus there is a smaller gap between the rich and poor than in, say, Paraguay. (But the gap between the rich and poor in Chile is still too wide.) Chile is a member of the OECD, Organization of Economically Developed Nations. Yet there is much here that is dysfunctional and unjust. I discuss some of that here, and have fun doing so.

This book is not a travelogue, a book filled with lists of places to stay and places to go. You can find plenty of those on the internet or buy a book filled with pictures and maps from Fodors. Instead, what I am trying to do is write something like George Orwell would have written: make a point with satire and do it from the vantage point of actually being there.

I live here now, having moved from The United States in 2011. I first came to Chile in 2005 to work at a winery, where I wrote a book about my adventure there. So I have spent a decade here on and off. Now I work as a freelance tech writer and live in the country 50 km outside Santiago. My wife lives in our apartment in Santiago. She says I live like a bohemian hippie. That might be true, but I have earned the right to live where I want and work when I want to having worked 30 years in cubicles all across the USA and traveling 15 years continuously for business. Now she understands this.

When I first moved here, I joined the huddled masses in Santiago and took the subway to work twice a day just like millions of other workers. In the country, where I live now, I am free from all that. I plant a garden and have room to stretch out, breathe clean air, and reflect upon the world around me and the country where I live. I have no car; I ride a bike. Or I ride my horse.

With my experience living here, I want to share with you what Chile is really like, so that if you come here and visit you will have a deeper understanding of the culture that lies beyond the impressive geography. I have always felt that one should read a country’s writers before one goes there or at least read something besides a colorful travel guide. So in addition to reading my book you might read a novel by Roberto Bolaño or some poems by Nicanor Parra (Cervantes Prize), Pablo Neruda (Nobel Prize), or Gabriela Mistral (Nobel Prize).

If I had to compare this work to another it would be Peter Mayle’s “Toujours Provence,” a funny look at living in Southern France and a culinary tour. I still laugh when I recall that one of Peter’s neighbors in Provence put up a sign that said “beware of snakes” to try to keep German campers away. But this is no culinary tour. There’s no point: Chilean food is boring and bland. Go somewhere else if you want something good to eat. Instead of exploring the menu, or the lack of a palatable one, I will introduce you to my neighbors and look at the wider Chilean culture, a constant source of amusement, sorrow, and irony.

There is a TV show here each Sunday called “Santiago is not Chile,” which is the point I want to make. It would be dull to write about the city, because I find one city is just like any other: too many people in one place.

So relax and read and let me take you on a tour of The Avocado Republic. Then judge for yourself whether Chile will soon be a developed nation, as the politicians say, or whether it is just another backwater Banana Republic, ripe for the next revolution.

Chile Independence Day

17 September 2014.

This week is Fiestas Patrias (Patriotic Holidays) in Chile. It's the longest holiday of the year in this country which, like the rest of Latin America, has many holidays.

Having lived here for 4 years continuously, and traveled back and forth for 9, I am still a little confused as to what this holiday means. The first day, September 17, has something to do with independence from Spain, but that is not the day that Chile formally declared independence from Spain, which was February 12. The 2nd day of the holiday, September 18, is a day to commemorate the *Glory of the Army*. But that would seem to be a repetition of the day just before it, as war is how one usually wins their independence.

Not much thought is given here on this holiday as to how Chileans tossed out the Spanish in 1812, although everyone is required by law to fly the flag. Instead the biggest concern is "how am I going to get out of town with all the traffic?" In Chile, the saying that "all roads lead to the capital" is literally true. The country is so narrow that you can see one border from the other (At times, you can see the tallest mountains in the Andes and the border with Argentina from the coast.). So here: *all roads do lead to the capital*, because there is no way to drive around it.

To make it possible to get out of the capital with the horrible traffic jams of previous years, the government has put in place a plan to turn 4 lane freeways into 3 lanes going out and 1 going in for the exodus and flipping that around for the return. Those who want to drive the high snow-covered crossings into Argentina are told to be prepared for a long wait, as the Argentine border guards are on strike.

This year there is another logistical problem, and that is the dearth of automatic teller machines in rural areas and the beach. People are queuing up in lengthy lines to withdrawn cash, if those machines have any cash at all. Last weekend was typical here in Curacaví, which is where I live. Both cash machines at the only grocery store in town were out of cash, and the grocery store cash register said my debit card was invalid.

The problem this year is made worse because thieves have stolen so many ATM machines that it is starting to affect their availability. First they used the tactic of wrapping a chain around them and yanking them free of their moorings with stolen SUV vehicles. So the banks erected steel pylons out front to stop that. Then the thieves imported a technique from Spain, which is to pump the ATM full of gas and then ignite that to blow open the safe. The problem is this technique is new to Chile, so the thieves are still trying to figure out how much gas to use. So instead of blasting open the ATM, this week, on more than one occasion, the thieves blew up the entire bank building, along with the cash.

To Chileans, the Fiestas Patrias means 4 or 5 days spent with family, gouging themselves on meat. Last Saturday, I asked the guy who sells me fish every weekend how many people would buy fish from him this week. He said, "no one."

Instead this week is a bacchanalian feast for carnivores, with sausage (*choripan*), kabobs (*anticuchos*), beef (That has many names.), goat (*cabra*), lamb (*oveja*), and pork (*cerdo*) on the barbecue grill (*asado*). This stuffing one's self goes on for days. At the end of this orgy of meat, all you want to do is eat some kind of plant, like lettuce, to give the liver a chance to expel all that fat.

The gringo would have no patience for how Chileans light a barbecue grill. Chileans use charcoal for fuel, which is wood that has smoldered, but not burned. That is called *carbon vegetal*. To light the fire, Chileans put a match to a newspaper and fan the flames furiously, for something like 20 minutes, until finally one tiny glowing ember finally erupts into a flame. I find the American approach much easier: douse the whole affair with kerosene, toss in a match, and, *woooooosh*, the fire is lit.

So starting tomorrow we will be enjoying *empanadas de pino*, which are glorious meat pies with an olive inside (Be careful as the olive has a pit, which can break a tooth.), *chicha* (sweet fruit wine), and people dancing the *cueca*, which is a three-step dance where the woman traditionally wears a brightly colored dress and the man (*huaso* or cowboy) looms over her with a white scarf held aloft and spurs fixed to his boots. It is an elegant dance, when done correctly. It looks ridiculous when those who cannot, like foreigners or politicians preening for the camera, give it a try.