

January 2003

Our first stop was at Isla Robinson Crusoe, which is a small, rugged island in the Pacific 400 miles west of Santiago de Chile. This was our third dose of the outstanding Chilean hospitality. The journey required 48 hours of travel time. We flew from Detroit to Dallas to Santiago and spent the night. The next morning I was able to fly co-pilot for the three-hour flight in the six-seat Aero Commander. We landed on the very short airstrip, which has a cliff at one end and a "ski-jump" out over the ocean at the other. There is no road to the town, so we were transferred by boat. The adventure really began when the captain shut down the boat's single engine near a lee shore and then crawled down into the engine compartment to fix something. We eventually reached the pier in San Juan Bautista, which is the island's only town with 500 inhabitants. There were only four other foreign tourists on the island when we arrived. Everyone we met on the island wanted to know what compelled us to visit. I explained in broken Spanish that last year we had visited Easter Island and the flight from Santiago passes directly overhead. The island looked interesting from the sky and we later read an article about it and decided to visit.

Our room was at the Hosteria Villa Green. They have four guestrooms, but we were the only guests after the first night. We had read that there was no crime on the island and there was no lock on our door. In 1704 Alexander Selkirk was marooned here for over four years and Daniel Defoe based Robinson Crusoe loosely on his story. The townspeople were all at the Sunday afternoon soccer game when we arrived. There are six teams and they take it very seriously. There are a few small restaurants and a couple of bars. Alexander Selkirk is said to have climbed daily to a lookout to scan the horizon for ships so we followed his lead the next day to enjoy the incredible views. The highlight of our stay was a six-hour, fourteen-mile hike across the island. An open fishing boat took us to the other end near the airstrip and we walked back to town. The views were amazing as the land changed from desert to forest. We climbed higher along the steep and sometimes scary trails cut into cliffs to the rainy side of the island. We also enjoyed hikes to El Centinela and El Pungal. We spent Christmas relaxing at Plazoleta del Yunque and then enjoying a lobster dinner.

There has been no shortage of botanists visiting the island, each attempting to identify and document a species of plants or flowers. At last count there were 105 endemic species. Each one is probably documented in a PhD dissertation someplace. I developed a blistering rash on the back of my hands. I think that I must have rubbed some unique plant on the narrow trails. I'm not sure what I would tell the doctor upon my return, but it healed by itself after a week. Maybe they are running out of plants to count because we met a man turning over stones as we were leaving. He explained that he was there to study spiders.

The lifestyle of the people is very simple. The island's economy revolves around lobster. There are 120 lobster fishermen on the island. Each plane to the mainland carries the lobsters to the dinner tables of Santiago. The money from the lobsters pays for the monthly visit of a small, clunky freighter bringing flour, rice, beer, Christmas toys and so forth. Tourism is a minor contributor to the island. The average income per family is two or three hundred dollars per month, which provides a comfortable living. There is no bank. All transactions and everyone's life savings are in cash. Children are largely unsupervised on

the island, even after 10:00 PM. There are fewer motor vehicles than Mackinac Island. The school has eight grades and exceptional students can receive government grants to study further on the mainland.

The weather was sunny with temperatures around 80 until our scheduled day of departure. Our flight out was canceled. It was a great place to be stranded for an extra day, but four years marooned alone would be a different story. There were 295 passengers on our return flight, but 293 were lobsters. I had a great time flying the plane back to the mainland, but Cheryl could not relax. She spent three hours leaning forward in her seat, afraid that the squirming lobsters would escape from the damp cardboard boxes stacked directly behind her. The airline provided drinks, and she slammed down her Pisco Sour and mine too.

We spent another night in Santiago and the next day flew south for 1300 more miles to Punta Arenas. It was over 80 degrees and sunny in Santiago, but Punta Arenas is deep in the wind-swept, barren region called Patagonia. It covers the southern fourth of the continent and includes parts of both Chile and Argentina. The temperature never gets much higher than 50 degrees and the wind seldom drops below 25 mph.

Our economy rental car had no hubcaps, a bulge in one tire and was covered from front to rear with stone chips. We were glad that the windshield was already beyond repair, so they couldn't charge us for that. The condition of the car was an omen of what to expect on the Patagonian roads. It was a five-hour drive to Torres del Paine National Park. This translates into English as "Towers of Paine"; perhaps this was another omen. The first part of the road was paved, but the last 100 miles was a bumpy gravel strip. There are no radio stations, and no electricity for that matter in these parts, so I entertained myself by singing "Zombie". I would try to match the car's speed over the bumps to allow my voice to modulate like that of "The Cranberries'" lead singer. I think that her name is Dolores something or another. But I digress.

Torres del Paine is immensely popular with the backpacker set and the trails were crowded. On the famed circuit trail we seldom went ten minutes without encountering another group of hikers. The centerpiece of the park is a set of stark granite towers rising almost vertically and surrounded by several snow-capped peaks with glaciers hanging from the upper elevations. We took several long hikes ranging from 10 to 16 miles. We crossed ice-cold rushing rivers; saw dramatic waterfalls and beautiful lakes. In the French Valley we heard what sounded like thunder every few minutes. We looked up to see sections of high glaciers break off and fall to the valley below.

We were fortunate that we had a flat tire on our second day in the park. I say fortunate because one of the other guests in the hotel had three flat tires in as many days. I translated for him with the hotel mechanic who was able to patch his tire, then mine, then that of an Austrian family. In the spirit of true Chilean hospitality, the mechanic readily left his other duties to help us. I spent an hour with him and learned that the Hosteria Pehoe ran off a diesel generator and has its own water and sewage systems. Four times a day he stokes a wood fire to heat water for showers and the radiators that warm the rooms. The hotel has a satellite phone and is not connected by a wire to anything. It sits on

a small island with incredible views. We chilled our beer for happy hour in the icy lake at our front door. We were so far south that there was still light at midnight on New Year's Eve. We toasted the New Year with lake-chilled champagne.

The highlight of our trip was a boat ride to Glacier Grey. I believe that the boat carrying fifty passengers was brought in by truck in pieces and welded together on the spot. The Captain had great confidence in his vessel and pushed around icebergs at least ten times the weight of the boat to get close to the face of the glacier. Great chunks were breaking off regularly and splashing and bobbing. The face of the glacier was over 100 feet above lake level, and he brought us within two boat lengths of the deep blue ice. We've seen glaciers in Alaska and New Zealand, but nothing like this.

On our last day wind gusts were over 60 mph, so we hiked in a relatively sheltered area of the park. We saw a skunk, a fox and hundreds of guanacos. Guanacos look like a cross between a deer and a llama. It was mating season and they put on quite a show prancing and snorting.

Food was unremarkable except for the fresh fish on Isla Robinson Crusoe. Lobster was overrated as it is served cold, sliced in half and with mayonnaise on top. We didn't have the heart to ask for it to be heated and served with melted butter. Breakfast buffets looked more like a dessert table. Good Chilean wine was \$2 per bottle. Chile has, by far, the best hospitality in South America. Not much English is spoken, but the people couldn't do enough for us.

Jimmy Buffett wrote, "Reading departure signs in some big airport reminds me of the places I've been". Not me. The weekly flight to the Falkland Islands departed from Punta Arenas around the same time as our return. I kicked myself for not having scheduled the time for that trip, too. The trip home was uneventful, although as of this writing, we're still awaiting one suitcase. Maybe it's enjoying an adventure trip in the Falkland Islands.

Isla Robinson Crusoe, while in Chilean territory counts as the 80th country we've visited according to the list we use. It can be found at <http://www.travelerscenturyclub.org/> along with an explanation of what they consider a "country" and a "visit".

Back to <http://www.odendahls.com/>.