

Santiago and Cooking Class in Chile

I'm going to call this adventure the year with two Springs. After having lovely spring in Chicago, I can enjoy another one in the southern hemisphere as the seasons are reversed. Its a great feeling!

I feel like I've been in Santiago forever. The flight from Chicago to Miami was good -- a uneventful domestic flight. Then of course there's Miami airport. It is always such a madhouse, but I retreated to American's lounge, so it was a bit more peaceful . Thats when the fun ended.

On the Miami to Santiago flight (9 hours), I had the bulkhead window in a 767-- feeling very 1980's. Where did they get this plane -- has it been in storage awhile? It was not a good experience and not that much room available for a business class seat. Thankfully on the evening flight I could (try to) sleep most of the way.

The cabin was incredibly cold. Flight attendants never came around with water -- my seat-mate commented on this too. I somehow landed in Santiago totally exhausted and faced 1 1/2 hours standing in the immigration line then a two block long queue for he agricultural screening. Everyone's luggage, parcels and purses is checked for incoming agricultural products. If you haven't declared you are bringing in food/snacks and they find even a bag of peanuts, you can be fined \$200! The one bright event of the morning was seeing Victor, the transfer agent waiting for me as I exited immigration/customs. I always like it when I arrive after a long flight to see a trustworthy person waiting for me holding a sign with my name. Christian Vera, my OAT (Overseas Adventure Travel) guide, had arranged it.

I was pretty much dead the rest of the day (Thursday) and all I could muster was a walk to the main street to visit several banks and a room-service sandwich. Those who've traveled with me know how weird I am about money. I like using small-denomination bills when traveling and new or gently used is even better. I tried several banks (even Citibank) and change offices and no one could give me any amount in sufficient quantity .

I love Santiago -- its architecture is so interesting and my favorite building is shaped like a (pre - iphone) cell phone. This is the corporate center for Telefonica, Chile's mobile phone supplier.



Thank goodness for Scotia Bank that gave me packs of a hundred 1000 peso notes (worth about \$2 ea.) and 2000 peso notes (\$4. each). Bless their hearts. My USD was scrutinized and counted by several people before it was accepted. Counterfeit money is a problem here.

I did appreciate how beautifully crisp the air is and the ring of snow covered Andes Mountains surrounding the city. Its a gorgeous, clean city with friendly people - its a pleasure to be back.

And.... I had Victor's card and after I revived a bit called and asked him to be my driver for a few hours on Friday. He said yes.

As usual I had errands to run -- a supermarket for mosquito spray for hotel rooms, dog biscuits (more about this later) and almonds (which I knew not to pack). As for sightseeing I wanted to visit Cerro San Cristobal, a high mountain that is a city park complete with walking/biking paths and lots of theme gardens. And the zoo -- not something I usually do-- as Santiago has one of the few zoos in the world housing African (not Asian) elephants. They are gorgeous animals, though the male looked a bit drawn, but the female looked chubby and happy. She might be pregnant.

And food..... My favorite restaurant in Santiago is El Galion at the Central Market and I've had some great meals there. One of their specialties is snow crab from the Straights of Magellan (see photo) and the other is the "Jardin de Mariscos" -- literally "Seafood Garden" which is a seafood buffet presented on a huge tray. It is enough for two or three people and it isn't cheap, but Victor and I did the best we could.

Victor dropped me off at the "Museo de la Moda" -- a private fashion museum housed in a Frank-Lloyd Wright inspired home built in 1970. The home itself is spectacular and the exhibits outstanding. Currently they are showing fashions from the 1980's - lots of hi-fashion stuff, as well as Madonna's conical bra and jewelry and the t-shirt Michael Jackson wore in Thriller. It took me 2 hours to get thru the museum -- it was a great experience.

I returned to the hotel about 6pm planning on a leisurely evening. Then a phone call. Chef Richard Knobloch was in the lobby! I read about him in Travel and Leisure Magazine some years ago and he offers an all-day cooking class in Santiago. When I first contacted him he seemed disappointed that I was just one person interested in a session, and I didn't hear from him after that. So I thought maybe the class wouldn't go. But when I checked email soon after arrival, he wrote he was available for Saturday. What luck!

Anyhow Chef Richard came by to interview me -- "what restaurant do you work at" was his first question. Oops! After explaining I wasn't a professional cook we worked on what my interests and goals might be for the class. My interests were technique, fish and seafood. He said he would pick me up at 9am on Saturday.

What an experience! After spending about 3 hours at the huge public market (I didn't notice any other foreigners there), looking, touching, smelling and sampling food, choosing the ingredients for the class, talking with vendors and being air-kissed a lot (that's the custom here when you meet people), he called for his nephew (a sommelier) to come help transport everything. We had enough vegetables, fish and seafood to feed an army!



LaVega Market is food central for those living in Santiago. On any day, you can buy enough food to feed an army -- and its all fresh. It is a great place to both shop and people watch.

Chef Richard Knobloch checks out an octopus for freshness. It later became part of our cooking lesson and dinner.



Then it was to the family's apartment and the true fun began. I can't say it was a hands-on experience, though I was asked to stir now and then, but there was a lot of explanation, tasting, and show and tell. I was perched in a stool at the end of a 25 ft preparation counter for most of the afternoon. This is what "we" made:

- fresh juice •
- several kinds of snacks •
- two kinds of fish - each prepared in a different way •

- shrimp (roasted with an amazing glaze) •
- abalone (I later gorged myself on this!!)•
- cerviche •
- several sauces and purees •
 - roasted snow peas •
 - quinoa - from scratch! •
 - Chilean tomato salad •

In effect, I had three teachers that day -- my own professional chef, my own sommelier -- who after being disappointed to learn I didn't drink-- taught me the finer aspects of wine appreciation using a non-alcoholic wine; and a sous-chef for the chopping, washing and cleaning up as we went along. We cooked for 6 hours and ate for 1 1/2! I didn't return to the hotel until after 9pm -- again totally exhausted!

I don't have recipes, but learned several new techniques and would be happy to share them with you if you are interested.



Here I am with "the fish" -- which was great eating. We made a total of 15 dishes and in traditional Chilean style, just set them down the center of the table so everyone could serve himself.



It was now Sunday morning and the first day of the Easter Island pre-trip. Christian (guide) had called and told me our first official activity would be a walking tour around Santiago beginning at 1:30. I realized I had two hours available and called Victor (driver) to take me to the Sunday-only Antiques Market. I love this place -- it is a huge warehouse open just this day of the week. Going thru it is like going thru grandma's attic. There is tons of furniture from all eras, booths with jewelry and small items and salvaged architectural pieces from old mansions. I remember last time I was here I was trying to bargain on a lovely art-deco pin and the vendor and I couldn't come to terms. Guess what -- its still here but now Im not interested! Our next stop was the artisan and craft market. Chile and Afghanistan are the only two places in the world where Lapis Lazuli is mined. It is a gorgeous dark blue stone with flecks of gold throughout. We didn't realize the market opened at 1pm on Sundays so only a few vendors were beginning to open up at 11am, but there was enough to keep me occupied and happy. Prices are good -- even Victor bought a few things.

Time to meet the group. Most are experienced OAT travelers and that is great as we know how to work as group. There is a couple on their first OAT trip but I think they will catch on. The Easter Island adventure is a pre-trip and there are only 8 of us. In a week, we will be a full group of 15 starting the main trip in Buenos Aires.

I packed what I needed for the four days on Easter Island -including the dog biscuits. Stray dogs have just about the same status as cows do in India. They roam freely, no one bothers them and they don't bother anyone. They are said to be very laid-back. Well-- I'm bringing them a treat!

Sorry this is so long and only covers 4 days. But I'm on the 5 1/2 hour flight from Santiago to Easter Island and have plenty of time to be descriptive,

More in a few day..... thanks for reading this and following along on this South America adventure.



Gorgeous vegetables at La Vega Market