

# Valparaíso day tours with Ecomapu

Published in the July 2014 issue, pg. 29

Valparaíso, Chile, is a gorgeous walking town. Northwest of the capital city of Santiago, it's a relaxing, less-than-two-hour bus ride away on any of the large, comfortable Pullman or Tur Bus coaches that leave every 15 minutes from the Alameda Bus Terminal (*3850 Alameda Street; metro station Universidad de Santiago*). In this short time, I was transported to one of the friendliest and most welcoming cities of Chile.

Valparaíso is a port town, and everywhere you look the influence of British, German, Italian and French immigrants is apparent through the architecture, names of businesses and street names. It is a city of neighborhoods existing on *cerros* (hills), each one distinctive.

A large part of the city is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. For that reason, I felt it important to get away from the “lower” (flat) part of the city and walk its hills. The hills are not for the faint-hearted, as some of the inclines are so steep that there are stairs instead of sidewalks. There are also eight working *ascensores* (funiculars) as part of the public transit system to get you from the lower part to the upper part.

Well-organized free walking tour companies are very common in Santiago and Valparaíso. The guides work for tips.

In April 2014, I was staying at a small B&B near the Paseo 21 de Mayo scenic lookout and was told about a free walking tour of the neighboring area Playa Ancha at 3 p.m. on Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays; the Sunday walk fit my schedule.

It was run by a well-established, 12-year-old company called **Ecomapu Travel** (*Pedro León Gallo 457, Valparaíso 2360306, Valparaíso, Chile; phone +56 32 228 0275*), which offers free walking tours as well as fee-based scheduled and private tours.

I was so impressed with the guides Felipe Muñoz and Christian Uribe (both guides are present so groups can be split if they're too large) that I signed up through Ecomapu for Felipe's regularly scheduled "To Be or Not to Be an Artist" tour, a graffiti-and-street-art walk (CLP12,000, or about \$24 at the time) for later in the week.

The street-art walk was a wonderful few hours full of stories of artists, explications of political murals, social commentaries and anecdotes on the history of particular buildings and people who lived in the area.

That day, we visited Cerro Alegre (known for its early British inhabitants and an impressive art museum), Cerro Concepción (German, French and British architecture and site of the oldest funicular in Valparaíso, which opened in 1883) and Cerro Polanco (known for "Graffestival," a 2012 street art festival in which artists from Argentina, Chile, Brazil, Peru, México and Colombia participated).

We were on and off public transportation, including the famous No. 612 bus that is a thrill a minute as it careens around the city's impossible curves.

Felipe and I spent the following day together, again, on a private custom tour in the bohemian section of Cerro Alegre (reminiscent of San Francisco's Haight/Ashbury), Cerro Cárcel (the area surrounding a former prison, now a cultural center with the oldest Spanish building on its grounds) and Cerro Panteón and Cerro Bellavista, for a quick stop at Chilean Nobel literature laureate Pablo Neruda's home, La Sebastiana.

We even had time for lunch at one of the city's longest continually running restaurants, the *San Carlos*, established in 1934.

Since this was a custom tour, the cost was CLP5,000 (\$10) per hour, and we spent a total of six hours together. The guides and transportation were included; lunch was my treat. It was time and money well spent.

Ecomapu Travel also offers twice-daily free walks starting from Plaza Sotomayor at noon and 4 p.m. Tuesday through Sunday.

I left Valparaíso absolutely loving its quirky hills, its neighborhoods, its illustrious history, the amazing architecture and, most of all, its people, who must surely be the friendliest on Earth.

The Ecomapu Travel guides allowed me to enjoy the hidden and out-of-the-way places of a fascinating city to the fullest.