

## Snapshots of a Year in Chile

Alissa Vancour studied economic development for a year in Santiago, Chile, at the University of Chile. Here are some snapshots, both literary and visual, that she shared with us about her year there as she encountered new areas of study and exploration.

How did you get around while you were in Santiago? Was it easy?

Their metro or subway system is fabulous. It is clean, easy to use and quite advanced. The metro makes getting around very easy (especially since the bus system can be daunting to even the most seasoned traveler). Santiago itself is very large. According to Wikipedia, "According to the 2002 census, it contains a population of about 5.8 million, equivalent to nearly 40% of the total population of the country, making it one of the largest cities in Latin America ." I've heard estimates that Santiago is about 87 m<sup>2</sup>. In comparison Manhattan is about 38 m<sup>2</sup> and has only about 1.5 million people. Therefore it can take hours to get from one side of Santiago to another. Many people who have lived in Santiago their whole lives have not been to all the different communities (just like New York has boroughs, Santiago has Comunidades).

What was it like being an American, and an American Bahá'í, living in Chile?

It was actually easy for me to feel right at home since we were all speaking the same language. By that I mean that the Bahá'í community there was speaking the same language that my Bahá'í community here was speaking. With the Universal House of Justice leading the Bahá'í community through a united, unifying, global initiative to make more people aware of the Bahá'í message and spiritualize our world, we all were focused on children's classes, group worship of God, and study circles.

I also felt that there was a sense of closeness to the administrative order [Bahá'í institutions]...When I went to Chile, three days after I arrived in the country, I went with a bunch of youth to Talca to prepare for the National Youth Conference. That youth conference was like many that we have here in the US. We were talking about the latest letters from the Universal House of Justice, talking about the core activities, the importance of integrating the arts in our activities as well as issues of chastity and living the Bahá'í life. One of the things that stuck me was that while here it is common for people to quote from the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh, and Abdu'l-Bahá, there the youth would also quote from Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House of Justice. Not only did the youth and adults read the letters from the House of Justice, but the little kids would draw pictures about what was being said. It was studied in such a way that the entire community really studied all the guidance given.

What was it like when you saw the Temple site?

I saw the Temple site that was originally selected but not chosen as the permanent site for the Chilean Temple. I have an amusing story about the site not chosen. I was in Chile when the 2001 Ridván letter came out which announced the Mother Temple for South America would be built in Santiago. The school semester ended and I called up one of my friends and said "I have to go to the Temple site. I know when I get back the US, everyone will be asking, 'Did you get to see where the Temple will be built?'" "Not a problem," he said. "I know where it is going to be built, so let's get a group of people to go out there next weekend... but we should meet early in the morning like around 8:30 or 9:00." So, I figured we would get together, say some prayers, go out for breakfast, and I'd be home by 10:30 or so. I was wrong.

After a short drive toward the Andes mountains, our driver pulled over and we all got out. So I opened my camera and started playing with the zoom. That's when I realized that everyone around me was starting to stretch. I was not prepared to go hiking, much less climb a mountain -- small though it was - but very steep. We climbed for a while using our hands as well as feet. I was at such an angle that I could touch the ground easily while standing up.

So we climbed and climbed and after about an hour and a half I was complaining how my hands and feet were slipping. When we finally reached the spot where the Temple was going to be built, I took pictures, we said a round of prayers and then I collected every stone I could in a bag to take back home. I left Chile about a week after this excursion, stones and all.

On the following weekend the Temple architect came to Chile to look at the site. The location turned out to be a problem. The steepness of the mountain would have forced the Temple to be built either into the side of the mountain, or horizontally coming out of the mountain. Needless to say, all of my precious rocks that I so carefully carried down, and that I had given to friends and family with love, were no longer from the future Temple site.

What are some of the interesting things the Bahá'í community in Chile is doing?

When I was in Chile there were three Bahá'í schools: Escuela Muhajir, Escuela Faizi and Colegio Nur. Escuela Mihajir and Faizi are located in the Temuco region, south of Santiago, where many of the indigenous Mapuche live. More information about these schools can be found [here](#) and [here](#). I think one of the coolest things that the Bahá'í community in Chile is doing are these two schools in the Temuco region. According to the CIA World Fact book the literacy rate in Chile is at 96.2%, one of the highest in Latin America, but in the south access to education can be very challenging. It is very significant that the Bahá'ís are opening up schools here and trying to bridge the gap between educating the children and supporting the Mapuche community in their way of life.

Where else in Chile did you travel?

Here are some of the places that I got to visit...

The Bahá'í Institute in Labranza, outside of Temuco. This institute hosts both Bahá'í educational activities as well as general educational events for the surrounding community, which is mostly Mapuche.

The Atacama region in the far north of Chile. The Atacama desert is one of the driest in the world, with some places recording no rain fall for hundreds of years! I'm not sure if these are wild llamas, or someone's herd. But as you can see, there's no fences here. And on the right is a picture of the area in which many of Chile's copper mines can be found.

Here is a high altitude lake, again in the north of Chile.

And here is a place called Olmue, a couple hours outside of Santiago. With the length of Santiago, you can see that they have just about every climate imaginable!



