



Taylor

From Burlington Central to Chile

"I have tribal knowledge and I am not a stranger to this country anymore"

I have been in Chile for 5.5 months now, and I still have another 5.5 months left but I know that this year has tripled in speed compared to my outbound year where everything was about waiting, and now it is trying to savour this month before it goes by. I last left off in the middle of November, where I was just about to start my summer vacation. The end of November brought the end of the school year and really warm weather. With the start of December I was full into holidays, but I still had some school things to do. I was nominated as Queen of my class and another student from my class was nominated King of the class. We had some rehearsals to go to since everyone in my grade was competing and we had a little choreographed dance number with the whole group the theme was "The Men in Black". When the actual night came all the girls had to wear white dresses, and shoes (I was running around at the last minute trying to find white shoes, and a slip under my white dress, since Chileans didn't understand that the two sheets of sheer mesh fabric are SHEER) and the guys wore tuxedos. We were the last group to "perform" that night, since we had the younger grades compete for king and queen, as well as my little sisters doing a belly dancing routine, we even had our teachers doing lip-synching routines to old English bands, it was hilarious. After all the other routines we did ours, and afterwards we all had to sit down and announce all the homeroom teachers and then announce who were official king and queen of the grade. They based the winners on what class raised the most amount of money over the year for their trips, and other things. Turns out my class came in second. All the girls got a cute little crown (which is now on my jacket) and the winner got a massive crown and walked down the catwalk. The rest of the night was spent dancing until 4am.

That same weekend I had to get ready, and leave the Sunday to my Rotary Trip down to the south of Chile. 35 exchange students decided to go out of the 50 in the district, and we flew down to Punta Arenas acclaimed for being the most southern city in the world. After the plane ride we visited penguins in their natural habitat on this tundra beach, and they were waddling around everywhere. We then headed into our bus for the 3 hour ride to Puerto Natales which is home to the Torres del Paine (a very beautiful set of mountains). When we spent a day in the Torres del Paine it was so amazing and beautiful our pictures didn't seem to show how blue the lakes were or how big the mountains were. We even had lunch in the middle of a glacier lake, with the Torres del Paine on one side of us, and 4 exchange students swimming in the glacier water on the other side. I was fine with just touching the water. We even went on a boat in the lakes the next day and visited glaciers, and hiked towards them, the wind there was tremendously strong and trying to brush your hair at the end of the day was nearly impossible. When we headed back to Punta Arenas for our last few days we all went to the plaza and kissed the golden foot on the stature. The story goes that if you kiss the foot you will get good luck! One of the best things about the trip was the weather, it was the only time I have ever seen it rain during the day here in Chile, and I thought that maybe I felt snow at one point. I was so happy to see clouds as well. In the Santiago Valley it is a rarity to have any clouds in the sky, it is pure bright blue sky all day, and it never rains in the summer, NEVER.

When I got back from my trip, I had my "prom" so to speak I literally arrived that morning at 2 am from my exhausting trip (the day of we decided to hike up a giant hill that took us two hours and in the pouring rain, it was exhausting) slept and then woke up and got ready to go out that night. I got to see my class again after a month of hardly seeing anyone, and everyone could tell the progress I made with my Spanish, it was so nice to know that people saw improvements, the party was great, and everyone's parents came as well. After the dinner, the dancing lasted until 5am when everyone was forced to go home.

Christmas came very soon after and I couldn't even tell it what Christmas in Chile. The weather was very perfect and hot summer weather, and even

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the house wasn't even decorated until Christmas Eve where we had our very tiny artificial tree in the corner of the living room. Christmas Eve I was outside in my backyard listening to Christmas Carols and then at around 11pm we had our Christmas dinner, which consisted of normal Chileans salads, chicken, seafood, and homemade apple sauce (My host dad and I were the only ones who ate the apple sauce, it was the closest thing I had to cranberry sauce haha) At midnight all the kids and everyone else got to open up their Christmas presents it was very melodramatic since Viejito Pascuero (Santa Claus) didn't come at night, all the presents appeared during the day sometime. After the gift giving (where most people only get 1-2 gifts not the many in Canada) everyone sat down and drank together and talked a long time into the night. Christmas Day was not celebrated at all and everyone slept in, I woke up to notice that half my family had left the house so I was free to leave the house and spend Christmas Day at one of my friend's house. It seemed very odd for the whole family to be gone from the house Christmas Day, but it did just feel like another summer day to me. I was missing that snow!

Before the New Year's I had to change families and I moved to a smaller city Isla de Maipo, except my house is right downtown on the main street (compared to my last house being on farmland) and my parents own a supermarket next to our house (the house is also filmed in a Chilean Soap Opera and when they come I stand outside to watch the very "dramatic" scenes that happen at the front of our house, I even talked to the stage manager). I have my host parents Jorge, Cecilia, and my younger brother Jairo (14) and for two weeks I had a sister and a roommate Yazmin (16) who left on her exchange to New Zealand. In this new house I live by the church clock that sounds on the hour, the fire fighters siren (that always seems to go off at noon right when the church bells play a pretty song) and at night the two street cats on the side of my house that seem to fight each other to the death every night. I spent New Year's with this family and we watched the countdown together and toasted it with champagne, at about 1am the whole family came over to the house to celebrate until about 5am in the morning.

January came with more summer holidays, and the leaving of my host sister, as well as one of the New Zealanders in our district. When I had to

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say goodbye at the airport to my NZ friend I couldn't imagine myself there in 6 months, and I know that when I come home I'll be bawling my eyes out. Most of this month was spent going to Santiago and shopping and checking more of the area out, as well as hanging out with some of my Chilean friends. We then had a new New Zealand girl come to my old city and she is living with my old host family, so I helped her a lot in her first week here. At the end of the day hanging out with her, I felt so proud of myself about how far I have come, and that I am not a fish out of water anymore, and that most of all I have tribal knowledge. I am not a stranger to this country anymore. I know what buses to get on, how to use the huge metro in Santiago and if I don't know where I am going I know how to ask directions. I am not scared of the old men and the guys in general who stare at me through their cars (and almost crash trying to look at me while craning their necks not looking at the road) and all the whistles and cat calls in English. I know how to walk proud and act dumb as if I have never heard English in my life. (Though most people in my city think I am from Germany, and will shout it on the streets from time to time) But, this does not bother me, it is normal and routine to me and is just a part of life. My biggest accomplishment made here is that I am not a fish out of water, and helping this new inbound showed me just how far I have come, and I wouldn't want to trade spots with her ever. (I also did become number one translator as well that week haha).

February also brought summer vacations and in the beginning week I was able to go to the beach with my Rotary Counsellor, two of her daughters, Clea (an exchange student from Arizona) and Ella the new inbound. We went for three days, and we were very lucky that we got three sunny days as well (lots of times it is cloudy here on the coast). We spent those days most of the time on the beach as well as in the waves, which are very dangerous and I even got stuck in a riptide and was getting pulled out super far until one of my friends told me that I should try to come back in. However, it was extremely difficult so I had to start swimming to the side of the beach to get out of it. As well as the waves were super strong, a lot of times they would suck you into it when they were still far away and we would get swept up in it, a couple of time I was thrown all the way back to the beach again. One of the days we went to San Antonio, a big fish market, and we took the oldest and shakiest micros ever to get there. (All the old

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buses from Santiago which are deemed too bad go to the coast) Every time we pulled over on the side of the road I swore the bus was going to tip over however, it never did. By the end of the three days I had a slight tan, blonder hair, and of course A TON more freckles, along with me being half a foot taller than everyone else here in Chile. I am definitely noticeable from a block away.

So, February is coming to an end very, very soon and I will be going back to school sometime in March. The cold weather will come back which I am very excited for, the heat here is outrageous; to go anywhere (especially Santiago) you have to go early in the morning so you don't suffer from heat stroke.

I can't believe I am half way through and that I only have 5 months left here. Seems so unreal that 5 months to me seems like so little time in my eyes. I can't even imagine not talking in Spanish and having half English half Spanish dreams anymore, or wake up doubting if that last dream was in English or not. However, I must enjoy the time I have and savour it for all its worth.

Chao,
Taylor
Chile