



Stuart

From Kitchener to Chile

Having lunch with a Chilean soccer God

I guess what it all comes down to is that Google Images can only show you so much. Ok, maybe I didn't mean to start my Beaver Tale like that but it's true. The day I found out that I would be heading to Chile I immediately did a quick Google Images search to find out what Chile was like. Type "Chile" into Google Images, I dare you. Well if you're not going to I'll let you in on what you'll find. You'll be hit by pictures upon pictures of the most incredible landscape in the world (in my opinion). You'll see Patagonia, the Andes, the Pacific, Easter Island and so much more. It isn't until page 5 that you encounter a picture of a Chilean. Oh, and who is that Chilean? It's Alexis Sanchez, but more on that later. I now know what a warped perception Google Images has of Chile. Trust me; I was gawking at the mountains on either side of me while my Host family drove me from the Airport to Rancagua too. And yet once you turn your attention back to the people you are now living with, that's when you really discover Chile, that's when I realized how hard it will be to get on the Air Canada flight that will take me back.

If, like the average high school teacher, you find the use of "real world examples" helpful to fully understand a concept, I hope this helps

I'll start with the first time I walked into my classroom. Unlike Canada, in Chile you are in the same class, with the same people all the way until University. So when I walked into my new class of tightly-knit 17 year old Chileans, I expected to feel like an outsider, I was in street clothes, they were in uniform, I was blond, and they were far from it. Like a feeling shared at an Empowerment Seminar, someone in my class shouted out, "You're Beautiful!" Sure I was caught off guard. Sure, I was confused when it turned out to have been a boy who shouted that. And sure, I received the explanation that it was because of the blond hair, and not to fear actually attending classes the next day. And what was there to fear? I was only thrown into a whirlwind of cheek kisses, introductions, forgotten names, and corrections that I wasn't a "Gringo" (slang term for American), but a Canadian. However, the reference to an "Empowerment Seminar" becomes more and more appropriate every day. It's because you won't find people more welcoming, inclusive or fun loving than Chileans. I mean they told me I was beautiful on my first day, come on.

Another one of my favorite memories so far is also with my class. One morning, after coming home at 2AM from a soccer game between the Chilean national team, and Peruvian national team, I arrived at school at 9:30, since my mom had let me sleep in because of the late night. As I walked through the front doors of my school, I heard a sound. The best way I can describe it is that it sounded like Lord of the Rings was playing in the basement just as the orks begin to lay siege on Minas Tirith. As I turned the corner and entered the courtyard I found out just what I was hearing. My entire grade, along with the grade 12s, were dressed in lab coats, garbage bags, turbans and old shirts, and all were splattered with paint, oil, water and flour. It's called "La Guerra", an activity, that despite the teachers objections, continues to be a school tradition where the grade 12s attack the grade 11s with just about anything that doesn't do permanent physical harm.

And the Canadian, parent council, wash your hands before dinner, moms shudder at the thought of such an event.

However, I love this kind of spontaneous activity that these Chileans introduced me to. They have a passion for enjoying life, and having fun that I am yet to find in any other place. Plus, once the teachers were confronted with a mob of paint covered, adrenaline filled teenagers, they had to let us go for the day.

I was told when I applied that my exchange would go by faster than I could imagine. I was told the same from the Rotarians who helped prepare me for my year as well. I was even told from the Beaver Tales of last year's exchange students that it would go by in the blink of an eye. I guess I have found that the last 3 months have been the fastest in my life. However, looking back at all the things I've done in that time, it's apparent that these last three months have also been the busiest of my life. I guess I should mention some of that shouldn't I.

I'll begin with my family, and the things I've done with them. My family consists of Ramon, my father, Silvia, my mother, and Nico, Fran and Carolina (who's on exchange in Germany right now). Celso, my 22 year old uncle/brother also lived with us until November, when his University started classes again. Since my city, Rancagua, is about a 45 minute drive from Santiago, the capital, I've been many times. I've seen the sites like "Cerro Santa Lucia"(historical monument, highest point in Santiago I think), and "La Moneda", the Chilean equivalent to the Parliament buildings. I've also seen some of less, touristic areas, like this huge market in one of Santiago's districts that has absolutely everything you would ever need, none of it original, not much of it legally copied. I've also been to a Rotary meeting in San Bernardo, a suburb of Santiago where I met all of the exchange students. My host family has also taken me on some amazing vacations, such as to "La Serena" in the north of Chile, where we found quiet, beautiful beaches and incredible seafood of the Chilean Coast. We've also visited the cities of Viña del Mar and Valparaiso, busier coastal cities with incredible history and lots to do, oh and seafood, lots of seafood.

However by far the most incredible thing I have done so far happened the day before "La Guerra". It was a Tuesday, and I got out of school after lunch, because my family was preparing to

go to Chile vs. Peru in Santiago. To spell it out, soccer is religion here. The national team was playing a South American rival to qualify for the World Cup; Televisions on, Chilean national productivity, off. Yet long before we left for the game, we received a phone call that someone was coming for lunch. 30 minutes later, I was having lunch with Alexis Sanchez. Gasps of amazement from the Chileans; silence from Canadians. If you don't have a clue who this is, I'll explain. Soccer is religion. Alexis Sanchez is the best current Chilean Soccer player, who also plays for Barcelona. I was having lunch with a Chilean soccer god.

The explanation to how this all came together is pretty simple. Alexis Sanchez is technically a "host cousin" to me, coming from my host dad's side. He was injured, and came to Chile to be with the national team for the game, plus visit his family. That's where the lunch comes in. Although this may not be that big of a deal in Canada, almost any Chilean who finds out I had lunch with Sanchez goes crazy, one because I've been in his presence, and two because they've lived in Chile their whole life and never met him, and I had only been here 2 months. I feel so lucky to have met him, plus now I have a Canadian flag signed by Sanchez. That night we went to the game, watched "Los Rojos" win in front of a packed stadium on a perfect Santiago night. Definitely my favourite experience in Chile yet.

In terms of homesickness, sadness or language difficulties, I've had flashes of all of them, but nothing worth writing much about. The fact is that I've found that when I feel down, or depressed, I simply keep going, because 99% of the time you'll be doing something amazing in an hour and will have forgotten about all of it. Language is coming, every day I feel like I have more and more, I can pretty much get anything across I need to in Spanish, no promises that I won't butcher it though.

It's difficult to write much of a conclusion about an experience that isn't close to being over. Every day I find myself feeling more and more a part of the culture, a part of the language, and a part of the country. The people continue to amaze me with their generosity, their love for adventure, and their willingness to slow the Spanish down, and ask what in the world curling is to include a Canadian. All of this I've learned in the last 3 months and I'm so excited to see what else I encounter during my days being spent in Chile. And keep scrolling through the pages, but you won't learn any of this from Google Images.

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