

Chile stretches though over half the entire length of the South American continent making it the longest country in the world.

From the far north of the country still within the tropics, to its southern tip, reaching into Antarctica, Chile is home to the highest stretches of the Andean mountain range, volcanoes, glaciers, fjords, and the driest desert on earth. From its capital Santiago, you can surf in the Pacific Ocean in the morning and ski down an Andean piste in the afternoon.

Chile is a safe and welcoming country with good infrastructure, excellent hotels, abundant fresh seafood and cheap, delicious wine. Chile will present itself as the most trouble-free country in the whole of South America.

Electricity: 220V, 50Hz

Time Zone: GMT/UTC -4

Dialling Code: 56

Climate

Summer is from December through to March, and Spring from September to November. Conversely, Chilean ski resorts are best during the northern summer months of June through to August. The Easter Island is cooler, slightly cheaper and much less crowded outside the summer months. The same is true of the Juan Fernandez archipelago, which can be inaccessible if winter rains erode the dirt airstrip. March is an ideal time for a visit.

Festival Calendar

Last week of January –National Festival del Folklore (Santiago)

March - International Air Show (Santiago)

March – April - Semana Santa - holy week

May 1st - Labour Day

May 21st - Glorias Navales - Commemorates the naval battle of Iquique

May 30th - Corpus Christi

June 29th - San Pedro, San Pablo Day

August 15th - Asuncion de la Virgen

September 18th - Independence Day

September 19th - Armed Forces Day

October 12th - Columbus Day

Last 2 weeks in November - International Book Fair (Santiago)

Last 2 weeks in November - Feria Indigena Cerro Huelen - Chile's indigenous people congregate at the south side of Cerro Santa Lucia in Santiago. Features musicians, dancing and crafts.

December 8th - Immaculate Conception

December - Fiesta de la Virgen del Rosario (Andacollo) A festival featuring horse-racing, cock-fighting and processions.

Currency

The currency of Chile is the peso. The US dollar is the preferred international currency, but should you be arriving via Argentina, you can easily exchange the Argentinean Peso anywhere. US cash will always get you a better rate of exchange than travellers' cheques, but you should have no problems exchanging them or using credit cards. ATMs are becoming more popular, especially in Santiago. Commissions and surcharges vary from bank to bank and from casa de cambio to casa de cambio. Banks are generally open between 10am and 4pm Monday through to Friday, and closed on Saturdays.

Visas

Citizens of Canada, USA, Australia, New Zealanders and most other Western European countries do not require a visa, although US citizens will be asked to pay a 45USD entrance fee, Canadians a 55USD entrance fee, and Australians a 25USD entrance fee

Health

There are few health risks and the water is adequately treated in Santiago. Bottled water is advised elsewhere in the country.

Best time to go

Like Argentina, Chile has four distinct seasons. Summer, which extends from December to March, is best for visiting the southern tip regions like Parque Nacional del Paine. Spring and autumn are quite enjoyable as well, especially in the northern regions.

Upon arrival

Once you've reclaimed your baggage and cleared customs, you will be warmly welcomed to Chile, assisted with your luggage and taken to your hotel by private air-conditioned minivan/bus. Please do not leave the airport terminal building unless you have made contact with Amazing Peru staff.

Food and drink

Drink only bottled water. Pasteurised milk is widely available. Avoid dairy products that are likely to have been made from unboiled milk. Avoid street food vendors and the cheaper restaurants.

What to eat

To try some typical foods, here is a selection of what we recommend.

Empanadas de pino - Pastry-style turnovers stuffed with olives, meat, raisins and onions.

Humitas - Mashed sweet corn mixed with spices and butter and baked in sweetcorn leaves.

Pastal de choclo - A traditional dish of vegetables, beef and chicken, baked in a casserole.

Parrilla - A mixed grill of almost all types of meat, cooked over charcoal.

Arroz con leche - Rice pudding

Flan - A caramel custard

What to drink

Wine - Chilean wines are superb.

Beer - Escudo and Cristal are the most popular.

Guindado - Made with brandy of Guinda (a local fruit) cinnamon and cloves.

Gol - Another alcoholic favourite made with butter, sugar and milk

Highlights

Santiago

Santiago is an incredibly beautiful colonial city. Overlooking the city is the Virgin Mary, sitting atop the Cerro San Cristobal at 860m. While the city itself is quite large, many of the tourist attractions can be found in its central core which is small and quite manageable.

Mercado Central - This wrought-iron structure occupies an entire block at 21 de Mayo and Avenida Balmaceda. It's easily Santiago's most colourful market and is home to many great seafood restaurants

Museo Chileno de Arte Precolombino - open from Tuesday to Saturday, 10am to 6pm at Bandera 361, this museum offers a thorough overview of 4500 years of pre-Columbian civilization throughout Central and South America

Palacio de Bellas Artes - Located on Jose M de La Barra near Avenida Jose Maria Caro, is Santiago's fine arts museum. It has permanent collections of Chilean, Italian, French and Dutch paintings. Open Tuesday to Saturday, 11am to 8pm, Sundays and holidays, 11am to 2pm

Palacio Cousino - This mansion was owned by one of Santiago's most prominent families of vintners. It is open between 9:30am and 1:30pm daily, except Mondays. To get there, follow Dieciocho 438 until you reach Parque Alameda

Cerro Santa Lucia - Offers a respite from the bustle of the downtown core. You can easily walk from downtown to the east end of Huerfanos where you can catch an elevator to the top

Parque Metropolitano - Home to Cerro San Cristobal - Take the teleferico, or aerial cable car, to its summit at 485m for excellent views of the city

Museo Nacional de Historia Natural – Located west of downtown, in the Parque Quinta Normal, this museum is very worthwhile. So are a number of other museums, all found in the same park. You can easily spend a half-day in this section of the city.

La Serena

Important both historically and economically, the beachside city of La Serena is one of Chile's oldest post-Columbian cities. The region's silver, copper and agriculture were so important that the city had its own mint. Today, La Serena maintains a colonial air, although it is threatening Viña del Mar's supremacy as the premier beach resort. Apart from a string of beautiful beaches, attractions include a handful of museums and a number of nearby quaint villages and vineyards.

Parque Nacional Puyehue

Situated in the beautiful Lake District, this is Chile's most popular national park. It preserves 107,000ha (264,290ac) of verdant forest and awesome volcanic scenery. Dense forest hides puma, the rare pudú (a miniature deer) and prolific bird life, including the Chilean torrent duck. Nature trails, lake views, ski resorts, thermal springs, waterfalls and examples of some of Chile's strange plant life, in particular the umbrella-leaved nalca and multi-trunked ulmo, are some of the many attractions which draw visitors.

Puerto Montt

Settled by German colonists in the mid-19th century, this is one of southern Chile's most important cities. It features middle-European architecture, with shingles, high-pitched roofs and ornate balconies. The redwood cathedral on the city's plaza is the city's oldest building, dating from 1856. Puerto Montt is the transport hub and access point to the southern Lakes District, the island of Chiloé and Chilean Patagonia. The nearby port of Angelmó and the island of Tenglo offer a more relaxed atmosphere. Angelmó has an outstanding crafts market and fabulous seafood.

Valparaíso

Lying 120km (74mi) northwest of Santiago, Valpo is Chile's principal port and second-largest city. Despite its size, it is Chile's most distinctive city and one of South America's most intriguing. Occupying a narrow strip of land between the waterfront and the nearby hills, its convoluted centre has distinctive, sinuous cobbled streets, and is overlooked by precipitous cliffs and hilltop suburbs which are accessed by funicular railways and stairway footpaths. It truly is a rabbit-warren of a place, which probably only a lifetime resident could completely fathom. It is conducive to maze-like strolls and rides on the funicular, and its natural history, fine arts and maritime museums are justly famed. Muelle Prat, the recently redeveloped pier, is a lively market area.

Chiloe

Only about 180km (112mi) long and 50km (31mi) wide, the Isla Grande de Chiloé is a well-watered, densely forested island of undulating hills, with a temperate maritime climate. It is linked to the Chilean mainland by ferries departing from the island's northern tip. Its towns feature distinctive shingled houses and stilt homes, and its weather is known for precipitation and fog. When visible, however, a majestic panorama across to the gulf to the snow-capped volcanoes of the mainland are revealed. Ancud and Castro are the only two sizeable towns, but there are over 150 picturesque wooden churches servicing the island's small villages. Parque Nacional Chiloé protects extensive stands of native coniferous and evergreen forest and a long and almost pristine coastline. The rare pudú also lives here.

Easter Island (Rapa Nui)

Lying 3700km (2294mi) west of the Chilean mainland, enigmatic Easter Island is the world's most remote inhabited island. It is actually more Polynesian than Chilean, although the presence of Pacific Islanders in this isolated part of the world is as much a mystery as how their descendants managed to design and sculpt the hundreds of colossal statues (moai) from hard volcanic basalt - let alone transport them from the inland quarries to the coast. This really is off the beaten track: you can sail more than 1900km (1178mi) in any direction without sighting inhabited land. Chile officially annexed the island in 1888 during the period of expansion which followed the War of the Pacific. Only about 2000 people live on the island, and nearly all of them live in the town of Hanga Roa. The population is 70% Polynesian, with most of the remainder coming from the Chilean mainland. The island is virtually an open-air national park, and boasts 300 moai and related stonework.

Parque Nacional Laguna San Rafael

Despite the difficulty and expense of getting here, this glacier-filled, 1.7-million hectare (4.2 million acre) park in southern Patagonia is the most popular attraction in the Aisén region. It encompasses some of the most spectacular fjord and mountain scenery in the world and is dense with floating icebergs. The terrain is unforgiving for hikers, but the rewards are many: in the water there are ducks, albatross, Magellanic penguins, otters, sea lions and elephant seals; in the surrounding forests and uplands there are pudús, pumas and foxes. Charter flights are available from Coyhaique and there are a number of ferry services from Coyhaique and Puerto Chacabuco.

Parque Nacional Lauca

This world biosphere reserve, 160km (99mi) northeast of Arica, near the Bolivian border, encompasses Lake Chungará, one of the highest lakes in the world, spectacularly situated at the foot of the dormant twin Pallachata volcanoes. It supports vicuña, condor and vizcacha, and Aymara alpaca and llama herders. There is extensive bird life along the shores of Lake Cotacotani, and panoramic views from the 5300m (17,384ft) summit of Cerro Guane Guane.

Parque Nacional Torres del Paine

Near Chile's fragmented southern tip, this park is Chile's showpiece: a world biosphere reserve with all the diverse scenery of Alaska in only 180,000ha (444,600ac). The Torres del Paine are spectacular granite pillars which soar almost vertically for more than 2000m (6560ft) above the Patagonian steppe. Cascading waterfalls, sprawling glaciers, dense forests, and the chance to see Patagonian guanaco make it a truly wonderful experience.

Viña del Mar

Chile's premier beach resort is just a short distance from Santiago. The bustling commercial centre is also known as the Garden City, for reasons that are immediately obvious to any visitor. Viña del Mar developed as a playground for wealthy santiaguinos when nearby Valparaíso was linked to the capital by rail. It isn't a sinuously terraced marvel like Valparaíso, so its two distinct sectors of traditional mansions and commercial activity are easy to navigate. Horse-drawn carriages trot past attractive turn-of-the-century mansions on both river and beach frontages. The town is also the home of Chile's national botanical garden, comprising 61ha (151ac) of native and exotic plants. White-sand beaches stretch from the town centre northward to the overbuilt suburbs of Reñaca and Concón. The less suburban Horcón, Maitencillo, Cachagua and Papudo are less populated. Other than aquatic activities, Viña del Mar has a selection of museums and the magnificently landscaped Quinta Vergara public park, with its Palacio Vergara. The Venetian-style palazzo was formerly the residence of the prosperous Alvarez-Vergara family, and now hosts the Museo Municipal de Bellas Artes.

Volcán Osorno

This flawless cone sits in the Parque Nacional Vicente Pérez Rosales, the first national park in Chile, and is surrounded by wonderful natural attractions. Beautiful Lago Todos Los Santos is the centrepiece of the park, looking over the thickly wooded vista to the volcano, and offering ferry trips to nearby lakeside villages along with an opportunity of crossing over into Bariloche Argentina. Osorno can be climbed and is a popular skiing spot.

Atacama Desert

In the very northern half of Chile lies the driest desert in the world. There are parts of it where rain has never been recorded and the precious little precipitation (1cm/0.3in per year) that does fall comes from fog. Flanked on one side by Pacific coastal ranges and on the other by the snowcapped peaks of the Andes, the desert is a series of salt basins that support virtually no vegetation.

Nevertheless it is one of the most spectacular and dramatic landscapes on earth. In San Pedro, a placid oasis of adobe houses at the edge of the Salar de Atacama, there are immense volcanoes, most of them extinct, that used to be sacred Incan sites. Also close to San Pedro is the Reserva Nacional Los Flamencos, which boasts, among other attractions, Chaxa Lagoon, home to a flamingo breeding colony. Around the same region is the Valle de la Luna (Valley of the Moon), whipped peaks of salt and sand. North of this is the 150m (490ft) deep Chiu-Chiu lagoon, an astonishing natural phenomenon in the middle of the desert. Go even further north and you will reach the amazing El Tatio Geysers. At 4300m (14,000ft) above sea level, this is the highest geyser field in the world.

Hotels

All the hotels we recommend are clean, well located and comfortable hotels varying in services as according to their category. We rarely use hostels as the price difference is negligible between a good hostel and a hotel. In places like the Atacama Desert, we do work with some very good hosterias. We do endeavour to choose the best hotels in line with your budget. There are five star deluxe hotels we offer that are among the best hotels in the world. We will always quote you with good hotels on all our programmes but upgrades or downgrades will be available as per your request. However, as the price will decrease with downgrades, this will ultimately reflect in the services and standards of the hotel.

Flights

Unless otherwise stated, we provide all internal flights in your programme, excluding the airport taxes. We also provide international flights around South America and can quote, upon request, your international flight to Chile. We work directly with the best airlines in South America but are not responsible for any changes in flight schedules or cancellations made by the airlines. This is the responsibility of the airline in question. We will always endeavour to minimise any delays or changes but cannot guarantee a successful outcome.

Insurance

It is a mandatory requirement that all our customers take out adequate travel insurance cover. Once you have obtained your insurance, it is company practice to check the validity and cover of your insurance policy and we hold the right to refuse travel to anyone whose insurance does not satisfy Amazing Peru's stringent criteria. These include cancellation and curtailment, death or injury, medical insurance, emergency repatriation, delayed baggage, loss and theft etc.