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Learning to Love Chile: Through the Eyes of a Gringa

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Learning to Love Chile: Through the Eyes of a Gringa

Sarah Lyons¹

I'm the new girl in town. Not like anyone notices in a city the size of Santiago, but for me everything is new. And with new comes different!

Before moving to Santiago in August I had only been to Chile once and for three short weeks as a tourist. Everything is easy and enjoyable when you're on vacation! Then I moved here and now I find myself living in a maze of people, cars and buildings trying not to get lost, suffocate during rush hour pollution and make friends along the way.

Luckily some things haven't been too hard. I speak Spanish for example and not only that, but I can get by in Chilean too (in case there was any doubt, they are definitely two different languages!).

What HAS been hard is convincing people that I actually DO speak Spanish and that I CAN understand when they talk to me. Take yesterday's experience for example: I was at a local home improvement store where I asked an employee, in Spanish, about grouting a bathroom floor, the tools and the process. I asked without a hitch- no hand gestures needed and no vocabulary issues (heck, I even used words that I'm not sure that I know in English!) to which the employee responded "Te explico. ¿Hablas español?" (I'll explain. Do you speak Spanish?). I didn't because my mom raised me

¹ I'm originally from Minnesota but have lived in a few different countries before landing in Santiago after marrying a Chileño. I love culture, traveling, my 4-legged furry best friend, running, biking and cereal.. Take out or add in anything you'd like for how long you need it to be. Keywords: Chile, gringo, moving abroad, culture differences.

better, but I wanted to respond “No, I used Google Translator before I left home and then memorized everything I just said until I got to the store.” Bless his soul, just trying to help out, but seriously!

Language isn’t our only difference. I just spent the 18 holiday in Chile which was a darn good time full of friends and a few drinks. It was also full of dancing and everyone knows: gringos can’t dance. And if we can’t dance, then we REALLY can’t dance choreographed dances with designated steps that mimic a rooster conquering his hen (what?!). To make matters worse, being an excessively tall and blonde lady in Chile means that everyone looks at you because, let’s be honest, you’re like an out-of-place giraffe with no rhythm trying to dance like a hen. Loved the music, loved the *fondas*, loved the relaxing good times with friends, but have no doubt about it: I will be practicing the *cueca* alone in my living room for the next 11 months so as to not repeat the embarrassment lived this year!

Some other things have been hard to adjust to—

- Do Chilean dogs not sleep at night?! The dogs in my neighborhood bark all.night.long! I need my beauty sleep!
- I won’t even touch on driving or the fact that lanes end without notice, drivers are oblivious to lanes and the fact that taxis stop randomly at any time with no warning. Every time I pull back into my driveway without a scratch I consider it a victory!
- Beware: In restaurants not all red squeeze bottles are ketchup. You will nearly die if you put as much *ají* on a *completo* as you would ketchup.

That being said, there are so many things that I get to experience here that I would never have at home. Today at the *feria* a man running a fruit stand peeled open a *tuna* fruit to share with me... literally. I ate half the fruit and then he took the same half I had been eating and finished it off. Another man took the time to explain to me how to prepare seaweed stew, “Your facial expression tells me you’ll probably never make it, but you should know about it because it is part of our culture.” They don’t know me and don’t owe me anything, but both of them took time today to make me feel special and to teach me about Chile. Day by day I am learning more about this country and how wonderful its people are.

It may be loud and jungle-like, but Santiago is my new home. Moving abroad is tough. If it were easier, more people would do it. That said, it is the absolutely most enriching experience a person could have and I am so thankful for this maze I’m learning to live in.