

A bit chilly in Chile

...but never mind the weather report, come with us as we journey in the wake of those great navigators: Magellan and Darwin.

Our trip started with a very easy flight from Auckland to Santiago; easy, but noisy as we had the company of a spoilt and screaming two-year-old and her totally ineffectual parents for the full 11 hours. You can imagine our delight when they appeared at the same hotel as us...and then on the ship, and then on several of our tours ... We got quite good at spotting them and then going to another queue/room/restaurant etc...

After a lazy afternoon at the hotel, The Sheraton, in the shadow of the snow-capped Andes, we enjoyed a splendid, typically Chilean dinner of various spit-roasted and barbecued meats (some unrecognisable and the provenance of which was probably best not enquired after too closely!) with lovely salads, desserts and fresh fruit to follow, all washed down with a delicious, local, purple-red Cabernet Sauvignon – Yum. An early night meant we were refreshed and ready for the following day when we enjoyed a morning walk along the river into town and then back to the hotel to be picked up by our chauffeur-driven limousine to be taken to the ship, the Norwegian Dream, at Valparaiso. And here the fun began ...

We booked this cruise "last-minute" on-line, having received an offer too good to miss. Not having cruised with NCL since 1996, when we went to Bermuda to visit Sallie, on the same ship, before it was 'stretched' to accommodate an additional 500 passengers ... :(we were not sure what to expect but, apart from a few niggles, this was an extraordinarily fine cruise and incredible value for money.

First, those niggles - overcrowding, chaotic embarkation and disembarkation and the all-pervading and intensely irritating background music in all the public areas.

The low prices on offer meant the ship was absolutely full with around 400 Chileans and another 200 Latin-Americans adding to the 500 Americans and another 500 mixed nationalities. The ship just can't cope with these numbers and the canteen (sorry - Sports Bar/Restaurant) and main Four Seasons restaurant were particularly overcrowded most of the time. This was not helped by this being a predominantly cool-weather cruise so lunching on deck was not possible except on the first and last days out of Valparaiso. However, by dint of judicious timing we never had to queue to get into our two preferred restaurants, the Terraces and the Trattoria, and we enjoyed leisurely dinners every evening

First impression on arrival to board at Valparaiso was not good. We usually arrange to arrive well after embarkation begins and therefore have virtually no queues to contend with - but not this time. It took us over two hours to get through the formalities but at least our luggage had already reached our cabin by the time we got there. In over 20 cruises, this was by far the worst organized embarkation that we have experienced. The ship's staff blamed the Chilean authorities for the chaos but we subsequently heard that things were just as shambolic for those who had joined the ship in Miami; something to bear in mind if choosing to sail with NCL in future! Similar problems were experienced when taking the ship's organized tours where it was not uncommon to have five full buses leaving and returning at the same time, causing long queues in corridors and ashore at single gangways and tenders.

Now for the many good points. The food and service were excellent and right up with the best. In addition to the usual contemporary and Italian cuisine, at lunch in the Sports Bar/Restaurant there were also excellent Indian dishes, Asian stir-fries or pasta dishes and the Pizza and Salad Bar on deck was a popular alternative, especially on the first and last days, when the sun shone and it was inviting to eat outside. The all-day ice cream parlour was also a popular feature and there is something delightfully decadent about sitting in a warm lounge whilst eating ice-cream and watching glaciers glide by!

The itinerary was simply great and with so much in-shore cruising there was usually something to watch along the way and the Chilean fjords, Magellan Strait and, particularly, the Beagle Channel exceeded our expectations. Seeing the multiple glaciers of the Beagle Channel for a second time, in the twilight, on the return trip, from a grandstand seat whilst enjoying an excellent dinner in the Trattoria was quite a highlight, especially as we had not expected to sail back through the Channel, but be out to sea. The long, light evenings were a terrific bonus.

Being early in the season, there was more snow on the mountains than can be seen later in mid-Summer. A stop was made early-morning to view the Amalie glacier. Here it actually snowed and the glacier disappeared in the fog but the captain sent a boat out to collect a (small) iceberg which was then displayed on deck. Actually, this was the only 'bad' weather we had and we were incredibly fortunate to see no rain at all but bright blue, largely cloud-less skies for almost the whole time. The temperature ranged from 35°C in Santiago down to below freezing in the more southerly areas, so at various times we were in t-shirts or six layers of thermals and fleece; not surprising, really, only 1000km from Antarctica!

We had hoped that we might sail round Cape Horn but as it was still early in the season the captain deemed it too dangerous as the seas were even rougher than usual and there was still too much ice. A few days after our return home we heard of an Antarctic cruise ship which had attempted the voyage, and suffered for it by being holed and sunk by an ice-berg, mercifully with no loss of life. We were grateful for our captain's caution!

As Martin doesn't speak Spanish at all, and Sarah only has schoolgirl high-Castillian (which proved singularly useless in Latin America!), we decided not to risk following our usual course of taking privately-arranged tours and booked more of the ship's tours than we generally like to do. Apart from the problems getting on and off the ship, these were well-arranged with excellent guides and we were glad we had taken them. The best one that we experienced was the tour from Puerto Montt to Lago Todos Los Santos and the Petrohue Falls. This included a catamaran trip on the lake with spectacular views of the perfectly conical, snow covered Osorno volcano, the excellent and highly photogenic falls and probably the best lunch that we have ever experienced on a tour - three courses with soup, baked salmon as the main and a delicious dessert, with empanadas and Pisco Sours (the lethal local cocktail of a sort of brandy and lemon juice) as appetizers plus copious quantities of Chilean wine (just as well we weren't driving!) and coffee.

The restaurant featured a herd of llamas, several emu and a quantity of ducks wandering through the grounds as well as a display of ancient, rusty farm machinery plus a steam engine, for added interest. On arrival we had been warned that the llamas, although tolerant of visitors, had a tendency to spit if you annoyed them, and we should watch out for the ears being laid back as this was a sure sign. A particularly obnoxious type insisted upon sticking his camera right into a llama's face,

with predictable results, which caused great amusement among those of us watching his antics with disgust; we all raised a cheer on behalf of the llama!

We also took a tour to the Seno Otway penguin colony from Punta Arenas, which was an extravagance but we knew that timing was critical if one wanted to see these delightful creatures at their best and in any quantity, as they keep regular hours and are only to be found in the early morning before they go about their sea-borne business, or late evening when they return... a bit like London commuters! The tour left very early in the morning so we did see the penguins at their best - plenty of them and with the light just right for photography - this was an unforgettable experience and a highlight of a trip with so many highlights...

At the, curiously-named Puerto Corral anchorage (the ship actually tendered in to Puerto Niebla on the other side of the river!), we took a public 'collectivo' bus up to Valdivia as this was easy and very cheap. The one really must-see here is the vibrant fish market on the river bank where the stall-holders feed tidbits to the large colony of sea lions, which included one huge 'grandfather' who kept the smaller fry in order by simply pushing them off their 'perch' when they irritated him. We did hear that at least one of the ship's tours neglected to visit the fish market, much to the *chagrin* of the participants so we were glad that we had taken a chance to go independently on this occasion. Waiting for the tender back at Niebla, the early morning cloud had risen to reveal the Villarrica volcano, Chile's other perfect snow-covered cone.

At the end of the cruise, as our flight did not depart Santiago until 11 pm, we had booked a tour of Valparaiso and Santiago. We had been particularly keen to see Pablo Neruda's house, La Sebastiana, in Valparaiso, and we delighted to get there before several tour buses, which meant we had it almost to ourselves. The quaint building with its tight, spiral staircases, was packed with artefacts and memorabilia from a long life very well lived, and we found it fascinating.

Included in the tour was a stop for a typical lunch at a typical Chilean restaurant, where, with the help of the guide, we ordered a couple of inexpensive specialities about which we had read. Martin's meal was a huge, earthenware pot of broth with what appeared to be half a cow and the entire contents of a vegetable garden sitting in it and Sarah's was an equally huge platter with the other half of the cow and a similar quantity of sheep, pig, chicken and sausage on the side, accompanied by a good half-kilo of roast potatoes – so just a light snack, then!

The tour, which also included the fascinating and renowned Pre-Columbian Museum, worked out very well and we saw far more than we would have been able to if we had tried to 'go it alone'. We had an excellent, fluent English-speaking guide, driver and comfortable car to ourselves for the whole day and they dropped us off at the airport, exhausted, at 8 pm after a very comprehensive tour.

The flight home was largely uneventful except for three of our fellow passengers ... Yes, you've guessed who boarded with us!