

INSIGHT

South America

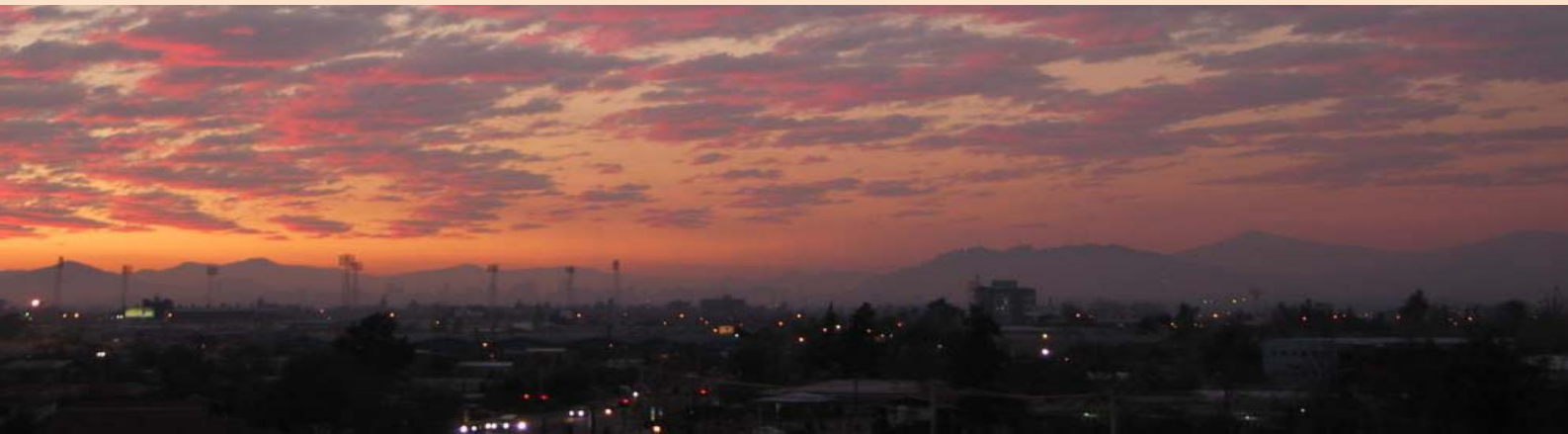
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What a wonderful WORLD

Inside this issue:

- Sharon returns from her ACTSpeditions
- Christmas in South America



The sun sets leaving a distinct silhouette. And as the colors deepen a city of lights is revealed, set against (and creeping into), a line of dark mountains – the Andes of South America. Your first night in Santiago can be a dramatic sight.

Chile: Land of Variety

Looking east over the city you see a skyline of modern high-rise buildings – which marks the central business district - cradled between the fingers of the Andes. This is the core of old Santiago – with its grand stone buildings and plazas –the historical and cultural heart of the city.

And this is a city with a heart – a deep heart. A moment in Plaza de Armas will have any visitor convinced in minutes. Here a glimpse of Chile's rich cultural heritage can be seen. The large square is surrounded by large stone buildings, the Cathedral, the old post office, and former government and official buildings of the colonial era. The square where the people would be gathered to arms – or for any other civic ceremony – is now the relaxing heart of the city. The first sight is the artisans and artists selling their paintings and offering portraits there and then, on one side are the tables and chairs of a café – Paris style – and beyond the painters, comedians entertain a large crowd with their loud and active open air display – without stage or props. The square's attraction is its people - hundreds, maybe thousands, – resting on benches under shady trees, watching children play, eating ice cream, feeding the pigeons, or playing chess under the bandstand.

The people are varied and interesting. They are a quiet people –quiet as far as Latin Americans are concerned – with a culture of music, and of performing arts. And all these can be seen on the street as well as behind the doors of concert halls and theatres. In the shopping streets of Santiago, famous classical singers and musicians can be seen performing. And singers and musicians will get on the bus to play two or three songs for their captive audience. Living statues in the main streets may adjust their position, or perform set moves to a knowing or startled crowd.

And behind the public scene we see a hard working, but hospitable, people. A people whose smile can come from many faces - because Chileans have many roots. Mapuches in the south and Aymara in the north have mixed and intermarried with Spanish, German, Austrian, Italian, English, Lebanese and others. And so the faces, and the surnames, tell of grandfathers or great-grandfathers or mothers who settled in the coastal ports of central or southern Chile. But now all are distinctly Chilean.

“ And behind the public scene we see a hard working, but hospitable, people. A people whose smile can come from many faces. ”

A short trip from the city reveals a country people – many of whom are of Mapuche origin – who lead an agricultural life, in work and in leisure. And the beauty of the country and of the people and their lifestyle is captivating. No visitor to Chile should leave without taking a ride on horseback through the leafy countryside of one of her valleys, with the backdrop of



the Andes Mountains, and the clear blue skies. Or without visiting a Rodeo event or seeing the *huasos* with their distinctive hats, shawl like capes, and riding boots. And the dances, which although perhaps not originally Chilean, are now so much a part of the culture.

But Santiago – despite holding more than a third of the population – is only a tiny part of Chile. The country is vast – stretching 5500km from north to south – marked out by the Pacific Ocean and the Andes mountains. And yet narrow – so narrow that you can stand in the middle and see from one side to the other.

From the deserts in the far north to the Antarctic in the far south Chile has a variety of landscapes and natural features. Where else on earth can you see penguins and camelids (Llamas), visit beaches and ski resorts, visit dry and arid deserts and take Antarctic cruises, visit active and inactive volcanos, and natural hot springs and baths? This is a country of variety.

The Atacama Desert in north of Chile has been nicknamed ‘the driest place on earth’. The Llama lives here, the camelid of South America. And like so many parts of Chile, volcanos can be seen – active and extinct – marking the landscape clearly along the San Andreas fault, the infamous “ring of fire”, where the Andes mountains have been formed by the merging of the Pacific and South American plates.

This beauty is made more dramatic by the sky at night. This is because just south of the Atacama Desert is one of the most dramatic places on earth to view our solar system. Not only are there very few clouds, and in the desert areas very little

light, but Chile’s location on the earth also means that a larger part of the Milky Way – which is shaped like a CD – is visible from Chile than from most other parts of the world.

In the south is the lake district, one of the most popular holiday spots for Chileans fleeing the city. It’s a beautiful green area of snow-capped volcanos and lakes formed by past glacial activity.



In the very far south visitors can see an area of great beauty. The last point of land before the Antarctic. An area normally visited by boat – it’s a bleak and isolated land whose beauty is just that - it’s isolated, dramatic and unspoiled beauty.

Physical, ethnological, and cultural variety makes Chile the spectacularly beautiful place it is. And at the autumn or spring equinoxes, when the colours of sunset are at their maximum, the moon can be seen at its largest, and the stars are clear, Chile and her people are a magical dreamland■

Ecuador

Ecuador: *Paradise Found*

We were at a language class, where thirty to forty Ecuadorians were gathered to practice their English. The topic that day was their country of Ecuador. As all the participants struggled to describe their country in an unfamiliar language, all kinds of descriptions were offered: Ecuador is a geologically diverse country; it has a huge variety of flora and fauna; it’s a small country many natural resources; it has a rich history; it has a colourful culture. All of which were correct, but finally one woman found the word everyone was looking for: “We live in a paradise.”



And this country really is a paradise. It straddles the equator, and stretches over four different geological regions, each different from one another, and each containing within it such richness in culture, vegetation, geology, and zoology. Ask any Ecuadorian, and he'll tell you that Ecuador is divided into the Coastal region, the Highlands, the Amazon jungle, and the Galápagos Islands.

The coastal cities are where most of the commerce takes place. The cities bustle with energy. And the warm beaches are popular with tourists and locals alike. Whale watching has also become a major tourist attraction. The jungles of Ecuador are literally rich with flora and fauna. 10% of the world's vascular plant species is located within an area that covers just 0.02% of the Earth's surface. Ecuador is also a paradise for bird watching and research. And the Galápagos Islands, where people can simply walk up to the marine life on the beach and touch them, is one of the best wildlife parks in the world.

The capital of Ecuador, Quito (pronounced "Ki-to"), is in the highland region. Nestled high in the Andes, at 2850 meters above sea level, it is the second highest capital in the world. Flying in to Quito is a wonderful experience: Looking out to the west, one sees the Andes rising upwards, uncomfortably near the plane. Off to the east, the valleys dip downwards, and can occasionally be seen between mountains, filled with a layer of cloud so that it almost seems like we could land on it. Then Quito appears. From the air, Quito looks content, and sure in the knowledge that the land itself would protect its inhabitants.

On the ground, the city is much like many other cities, except for the magnificent mountains standing guard in the west. At night, Quito looks like a Christmas tree, with the lights on the mountainside lightly shrouded in low clouds, giving the entire city a surreal feel. One could easily fall in love with Quito.

But the people of Ecuador are probably its best compliment. After spending three weeks in Singapore, we touched down back in Quito to take a cab home, and was entertained by first the driver's warm smile, then we listened to his incessant chatter about the weather, and shared laughter with him as we finally reached home. The Ecuadorian is pleasant and warm. He delights in just talking about his city, his country, his family. He is immensely curious about your city, your country and your family. Laughter is a common and abundant element in all our dealings with the Ecuadorian, whether it be a formal meeting with officials of a local organisation, or a simple dinner with close friends.

“ Indeed, there is beauty everywhere one looks in Ecuador. ”

Optimism and joy are characteristics very apparent in Ecuadorians. This country, like any other, has its issues. Unemployment and inflation are just some of the problems that occasionally crop up and harass the people of Ecuador. For the poorer families, those times can be especially difficult. However, the people are able to find the silver lining in all these situations. They do not ignore the bad things, but are able to look into the future and see what can possibly go well.



“ ...the people of Ecuador are probably its best compliment ”

And they enjoy themselves while they wait! Money is no object. Family and friendships come first. They would never think of imposing their limitations upon you. You are important to them. They would travel for hours to make it for dinner with you. And family is the utmost in the minds of all Ecuadorians. They love one another, and often express this unabashedly, frequently, and warmly. And when one needs a day off urgently for family matters, one often gets it. Perhaps this sacrifice, for others above oneself, is Ecuador's greatest treasure.

Indeed, there is beauty everywhere one looks in Ecuador. Paradise is a good word for it. But true beauty is seldom the kind that takes one's breath away the moment one lays eyes on it. True beauty is often the quiet kind of beauty, which leaves one wondering, and admiring, even days after one glimpses it. Like courage. Like joy. Like love, laughter, and life. Like compassion and empathy. And no matter the sort of beauty one looks for in Ecuador, he is bound to find it. Easily. ■



PERU: WISHES COME TRUE

Peru is a land filled with natural wonders for the avid explorer. From the scintillating depths of the Colca Canyon to the awesome heights of the mountains in Machu Pichu, the country is full of natural landscapes that fill your heart with imagination and inspiration. It is also home to the mysterious Amazon Jungles, which has produced countless myths and folklores in history.

Set against this picturesque backdrop is a harsh economic reality that has left more than half of the population jobless and living in poverty. In the downtown areas of Lima city, the capital of Peru, it is not uncommon to see street vagrants begging for a living, or young children peddling sweets. At a tender age where they should be enjoying their childhood pleasures, the economic realities have forced them to work for a living on the streets of Lima. Quality education in Lima is primarily found in the private schools, but these are very expensive, which means that many young children do not have access to quality education. For those who attend the public schools, many suffer from a lack of food and clothing, which results in a failure to pay attention during lessons in the class and ultimately discouragement from pursuing their studies further.

In the past year, our club volunteers in Peru had gone down to an orphanage every Saturday to run free English classes for the children in the orphanage. The orphanage is home to about 120 children between the ages of 4 and 16. These children are either orphans or come from severely dysfunctional families. Commitment to these children is very important, as they develop an emotional attachment to the volunteers very easily. For many volunteers, visiting the orphanage is both fun and eye opening at the same time. However, the failure to manage the potential emotional attachments could have adverse consequences on the children. Another challenge was to overcome the barriers of communication. We not only had to deal with the inadequacies of our command of the Spanish language, but we also had to learn to deal with the various idiosyncrasies of children. There was this curious occasion when one of my students contorted herself into a comfortable position beneath her desk, and refused to come out no matter how hard I tried to coax her. It was only later that my fellow volunteers told me that I had to command her to come out, not coax her, as she was too young to capture the nuances of linguistic persuasion.

Last Christmas, we organised a party for the children who had performed well in the classes. We made a distinction between those who demonstrated good attitudes and those who had behaved badly during the classes, as we wanted to use the “carrot and stick” approach to teach them the importance of having the right values and attitudes. The message to the children was clear – You will be rewarded if you have good attitudes.

Picture Above:

The text on the white board reads:

“Thank you Singapore. Your friendship is like the rain of beautiful flowers.”



It was quite a challenge to organize a party for the children. We enlisted the help of some local university students to help us with the organising of the party, and all of us thoroughly enjoyed ourselves in the process, although we were completely exhausted by the end of the party. There were only about thirty to forty kids, but it seemed like we were managing about a hundred! Nonetheless, the party was a great time and marked a closure of our activities with the orphanage for the year.

This year, we hope to work together with a non-governmental organisation called "Mission Integral", which focuses on improving the education and health of the street kids. We have plans to provide free English lessons to the street kids who are students in their mission house, as well as plans to train their teachers and volunteers, such as training in the English language.

We believe that there is an increasingly wide scope for community work among the underprivileged children in Peru, especially in the area of education. It costs an estimated amount of just USD260 to provide English education to a child for one year, but the investment into the future pillars of the nation can bring about extremely rewarding returns in the long term, both at a personal level as well as at the community level. ■

Christmas is such a fun time. In Singapore, we shop, we eat, we party; generally, we spare no expense at enjoy ourselves. But for some children in South America, this is only a dream.

nuestra navidad Latina

Our Latin Christmas

So.

Off we went, on Christmas morn, determined to share our better fortunes with those do not have it. We wanted to give unto others, but unknown to us, we too would be blessed.

The spirit of Christmas is an amazing thing.



Hogar de Niñas, Quito
This orphanage houses 40 girls. These girls are always so happy when we visit them. This time, we went bearing their Christmas gifts. They were delirious.



Casa de Amor, Quito

The children from Casa de Amor are very poor, with their parents not around much. So you can imagine their delight when we appeared with their Christmas gifts for them.



Making a U turn

Three months ago I was preparing to embark on my journey of a lifetime...to volunteer in South America, Peru. And wow time flew past so fast! Muy rapido!

Ever since I came back to Singapore, many people have eagerly asked me "So how do you feel? Tell us about your experience!" Well I have to say that it is something that is difficult to be described in a few words. It is unique, amazing and fulfilling. It is an experience that has become an important chapter in my life.

Everything kind of started from zero when I first reached Peru. It was tough initially; to be away from home and alone in a foreign place, the cultural difference and language barrier etc. It was like learning how to walk all over again. Then again, it was through this "re-learning" process that I have come to appreciate simpler things in life.

For the first month when I reached Peru, the GenActs Peru team helped me to settle down in many aspects. I was arranged to stay in a comfortable and affordable hostel that was located just opposite the clubhouse. Briefings were given to me on the culture, weather, surroundings and the kind of voluntary projects that I will be involved etc. The team members then brought me around Miraflores (the town where we were staying) and a few other places where I could go to for meals and shopping. I also met a lot of their local friends through gatherings and home visits.

The most difficult part for me was the language barrier. When you are unable to communicate, things could not be done properly, even simple tasks such as ordering food and traveling around on your own. GenActs Peru team helped me enrol in El Sol, a local school specialising in teaching Spanish. Spanish is a beautiful language and I love it! Armed with my amateur "spanglish" (read: Spanish mixed with English) after a month's lesson, I was ready to take on the challenge of being on my own to explore around.

I still remembered the wonderful feeling I had when I first took a bus on my own...yes, as simple as that! That night while lying on my bed, I was still beaming with joy and satisfaction. Other simple tasks "happened" such as making new friends, ordering food by myself in a Peruvian restaurant and making simple conversation with the locals etc. Although there were several occasions whereby the salesperson/ waitress/ bus conductor were impatient with my "slower-than-snail" conversations and less-than-accurate pronunciation, in general most of the locals were friendly and helpful. Despite the little hiccups, it felt awfully satisfying that I was able to overcome the difficulties and get things done.

The biggest challenge was to teach English to the locals with my limited ability to converse well in Spanish. GenActs Peru arranged a few interesting projects for me. I was assigned to teach basic English to a group of students at a learning institution. These students were from the highland with poor family background who were unable to afford school fees. I also volunteered at Panchita, which is an institution from domestic helpers and Hogar De Niños, an orphanage. Hence the age of my students ranged from as young as 13 years old to as old as 50 over years old! As the saying Chinese goes "Huo Dao Lao, Xue Dao Lao", literally, "One lives through the older years, one learns through the older years". How true that is...there is no age barrier to learning and gaining knowledge, as long as you are willing to. I was able to understand this simple philosophy from my students. The greatest satisfaction was that after each lesson, when my students came up to me to ask questions and said "thank you teacher" that I knew they had gained some knowledge from me. And I was glad to know that I had passed on good values to them and made their lives a little better!

I gave this write up the title "Making a U Turn" is because the entire experience has made me realise the basic fundamental in life again (which I believe many people have lost it in the rat race in today's environment). That is to constantly remind oneself not to take things for granted and "re-learn" to appreciate the simpler things in life. Simple questions such as "Why am I working so hard? What is the purpose of making such a decision? How much is enough?"



“ ...to constantly remind oneself not to take things for granted and “re-learn” to appreciate the simpler things in life ”

As the saying goes “Do not run through life so fast that you forget not only where you have been, but also where you are going. Life is not a race, but a journey to be savored each step of the way”. We are very blessed compared to many poor people in the world and we should be grateful for it. It has also made me realise how important my loved ones are to me and I should not take them for granted.

The lessons at El Sol also provided the chance for me to interact and make friends with students from other countries such as Canada, North America, Korea and Brazil. I still keep in contact with them via MSN Messenger and this provided an avenue for me to practice my Spanish after I came back to Singapore.

If you have realised by now, my passage is full of words such as “satisfying, fulfilling, and challenging”. So I encourage all those who have the heart to do similar things like that to stop hesitating and start investing in other people’s life. It doesn’t matter if it is a small or big contribution, as long as you know you have made a difference to another person’s life. And for those who are thinking of traveling to a foreign place to volunteer, go ahead! It is life enriching experiences like that that will be with you forever. When I look back twenty years down the road, I will be proud to say that I have no regrets!

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank all my friends and loved ones who have supported me in one way or another. And of course GenActs Peru and Singapore who had helped to make this trip possible! Gracias para todos!

I’m glad I took the step forward... ■



Financial Resource Support

The youths and children who participate in our programs come from financially disadvantaged backgrounds. They are usually unable to afford the materials and resources used in quality education. You may consider making a financial contribution, either as a one time donation or on a regular basis, to sponsor resources used in the various projects. The material and stationary costs per student is about USD 50. A typical ad-hoc project requires funds ranging from USD 100-2500 or contributions in kind depending on the nature of the project.

Networking Resource Support

You can help us market our programs to your friends. We are constantly looking for partners who may be able to offer their professional experiences and know hows towards developing our projects. While our projects are largely educational in nature, some of our projects require professional contributions from various fields.

Logistical Support

We are constantly working towards improving the quality of our training methods and materials. You may contribute in this aspect by providing logistical resources such as computers, teaching and training tools, materials for training and the like.

Human Resource Support

Finally, but certainly not least, you can sign up for our ACTSpeditions programs and volunteer with us!

Support Us!



Generation ACTS Club
International

Sharing Life | Living Life | Investing Life
www.gen-acts.org

our *Vision*:

To **impact** our communities and beyond by developing the **altruistic** and **entrepreneurial** potential of our youths.

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