

RED HOT CHILE

BY **DAISY PRINCE** | EVENING STANDARD | 2008

Valparaiso in Chile is one of those cities that has defied nature's wish to destroy it more than once. Its row of brightly colored buildings are arranged on a series of steep hills overlooking the Pacific Ocean, and are so precariously perched that it is easy to see how one large earthquake might make them slide like dominos into the sea, as many did in 1906 when a terrible earthquake killed 20,000 people.

The city has an extreme, if somewhat shambolic beauty. In the 19th century it was a key port for ships traveling between the Pacific and Atlantic oceans, and it was during this period of grandeur and growth that the city's 15 ascensors, which ferry the citizens of Valparaiso up and down its vertiginous slopes, were constructed, making them a rather terrifying and rickety ride. I was here on my last adventure as a single girl before getting married. I had decided that after travelling to a country halfway across the world by myself, without being able to speak Spanish, walking down the aisle would be a cinch.

Having chosen the Luna Sonrisa guesthouse mainly because the guidebook said that English was spoken fluently, I was thrilled to find a comfortable and pretty house painted plum purple with matching green trim. I had splurged on getting my own room, which had a view of a painted mural opposite, with Fifties clapped-out cars on the street below. It reminded me of a scene from a Cuban postcard.

It was evening when I arrived, and I decided to hear out at once. The views down the hills were of tin roofs and a further view of the port dotted with tankers and fish boats. The streets are wide and cobbled. It's a pretty place without being picturesque. The faded glories of Valparaiso's 19th century heyday are still present in the large and well-crafted houses, but time has worn away some of the grandeur. Still there is dignity in the way it's declined—even if some of the walkways and staircases have started to crumble, there are imaginative murals painted on the sides of houses that offset the decay. On almost every street corner there is an art gallery that doubles as a café, contributing to the artistic vibe. But as the night drew in, the unlit streets darkened to a pitch black, which made me jump at my own shadow more than once. Finally, I got to Filou de Montpellier, an excellent fish restaurant, where I comforted myself by trying all the seafood delicacies on the menu. I started with the local ceviche, a specialty of the region where raw fish is marinated in a citrus sauce, followed by fresh sea bass and a local white wine. Dinner on your own is not really that much fun and even though I'd brought a book along, I still spent more of the time studying my fellow dining companions. The Chileans are a courteous, reserved people—they are called the British of South America—and one of the best things about travelling there as a woman alone is that you don't get hooted at in the street as you might expect in other Latin countries.

The next morning, after a breakfast of jam, goat's cheese slices and guacamole on homebaked bread (the avocado is ubiquitous in Chile and seems to appear with every meal as spread, like butter), instead of doing the usual sightseeing, I happily volunteered when another girl asked if anyone wanted to go riding on the beach. We set out for Concon, a popular beach resort, where we had a few hours to kill before our ride, so we settled down to try a restaurant on the Avenida Borgono, a famous culinary spot on the coast. We were told to try a restaurant called Edelweiss which true to its name, had cowbells hanging from the ceiling, but the food was pure Chilean. I tried abalone (a kind of marine snail) for the first time, and I think probably the last—it was not unlike eating a very hard bit of rubber. But all was redeemed by a lovely grilled Reinata, a kind of Chilean bream, which was served with green beans and rice.

At around three o'clock we were picked up by Juan, a proper huaso or Chilean cowboy. Dressed in traditional cowboy kit, complete with Cordoban hat and poncho, Juan was the picture of Chilean virility. Mount on small but incredibly sturdy horses, our group of five girls started down the path towards the sea. Soon we encountered huge sand dune that stretched for miles—it looked like we were on the moon. When Juan asked us if wouldn't mind herding up some loose horses that had to be corralled for the night, it was like being given the chance to be Annie Oakley, and we whooped like bandits rounding up the strays.

As we found our way over the last hill, a wide beach stretched for miles and we were encouraged by Juan to gallop as fast as we liked. We rode like we were in the movies. No hat, no need to pull up, just hair flying behind you and the wind in your face as we plunged into the sea. It was the most fun I've had in years. When the day was finally over, we demolished a huge tea of homemade yogurt, jam crumpets and the ever present avocado mush. Having never been the kind of person who is satisfied with doing a fun thing just once, when I heard there was a night ride the next night for the full moon, I decided it would be too good to pass up. We started out at ten in the evening, having fortified ourselves with a local empanadas de pino (a pastry filled with spiced meat and onion). This time, instead of carry on through dunes, we stopped midway for an enormous bonfire, banjo playing and a few glasses of the Chilean national cocktail, a combination of brandy, lemon juice and egg white called a Pisco Sour.

Then we started for the beach and had a repeat galloping experience, only this time illuminated by the moon. Exhausted and elated, we headed back to the Luna Sonrisa at 3am. Valparaiso will always remain in my mind as the last special place I travelled to before I got married. I would love to go again, only this time not alone.