

## News from Nan

### TRAVEL

# OUR SOUTH AMERICAN ODYSSEY, 2008

MARCH 31, 2008 | ANNA



Iguazu Falls

*In February and March 2008 we visited the southern part of South America. Most of the trip was a cruise that started in Valparaíso, Chile, and ended in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. We also took two side trips to the Atacama desert in Chile, and Iguazú falls that sits on the border between Argentina and Brazil.*



We visited the following places (indicated on the map above):

1. Atacama Desert
2. Santiago, Chile
3. Valparaiso, Chile
4. Our life at sea
5. Puerto Montt
6. Punta Arenas
7. Ushuaia and Cape Horn
8. Falkland Islands (Las Malvinas)
9. Buenos Aires, Argentina
10. Montivideo, Uruguay
11. Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
12. Iguazú Falls

The cruise was on the *MS Rotterdam*, the same ship (or rather a more modern version of the ship with the same name) that Anna took when she visited Europe with her parents in 1955. Our tour group (sponsored by Elderhostel, now Road Scholar) consisted of about 80 people from all over the United States.

## Atacama Desert



We loved the Atacama desert and were glad we booked the extra tour. We expected to meet some of the Elderhostel folks there, but there were none — in fact, there were hardly any Americans taking part in our hotel-sponsored activities. Most were Brits with a couple of French women and a Chilean doctor and his wife.

The landscape looked a little like Southern California — palms and pepper trees. Most of the desert has little or no vegetation, but oases have grown up in the areas with some moisture.

We had to drive to most of the sites, and we also did some fairly long hikes. One trek was to the Valley of the Dead (Valle de los Muertos), misnamed because the “Spaniels,” as our guide called them, didn’t quite catch the name the indigenous people had given it. (Actually, our guides’ English was in general quite good. And I practiced my Spanish with every Chilean I met.)

Some of the more interesting foods we had included several varieties of fish, stuffed zucchini, delicious breakfast bread, many local cheeses including goat cheese, watermelon and strawberry juice, and a local alcoholic drink made from grapes and lemon juice (plus a “secret ingredient that if I told you what it is I’d have to kill you”) called pisco sour. It was really a treat to get Bing cherries (which, of course, are in season here). We also had a sort of corn pie that had beef and onions, raisins, olives, and hard-boiled eggs (besides the corn). It sounds a little weird, but it was really good!

## Chile: Santiago, Valparaiso, Puerto Montt



**Santiago**, which is in the central part of the country and close to the Andes mountains, is the political and economic capital of Chile. We were in Santiago for two days.

Near our hotel was the Moneda Palace, where the 1973 overthrow of Salvador Allende by Augusto Pinochet took place. We were told that people are still deeply divided (right vs. left, justified vs. not) over that incident. As has been true for much of its history, there is still a strong presence of the military in Chile today.

Santiago is a prosperous city (with the smog to show for it!), but a phenomenon we had never seen elsewhere is a large population of homeless dogs (not so many homeless people, but lots of dogs).



**Valparaíso** is a scenic city on the Pacific coast about an hour's drive west of Santiago. On the way to the port to meet our ship, we stopped at the Viña Indomita winery in one of the many Chilean wine-growing districts.

Valparaíso is known for its colorful houses clinging to the hillside, and for the strong and attractive legs of its women who spend a lot of time walking up and down the hills. The Chilean national congress meets in Valparaíso, but most of the legislators live in Santiago, so they have to commute back and forth every day when the government is in session.

We ate lunch in the nearby resort town of Viña del Mar. In the afternoon we boarded our ship and began sailing to the south, toward the Chilean lake district.



**Puerto Montt** is at the southern end of the main north-south highway in Chile. It is in the Chilean Lake district (a popular vacation destination), and the gateway to shipping lanes into the Chilean fjords and Patagonia. German immigrant influence is much in evidence (for example, dessert specialties include *Strudel* and *Kuchen*).

When we went ashore the ship was either docked (and we simply walked down the gangway) or we anchored offshore and used small boats called “tenders.” Here we used our tenders, and then drove by bus to Petrohue falls and Lake Llanquihue, which are in an area of temperate rain forests. Umbrella plants were among the many interesting species in the area. All around were spectacular views of many volcanos, including Volcan Osorno.

## **Patagonia: Chilean fjords, Punta Arenas, Ushuaia, Cape Horn**



After leaving Puerto Montt we cruised through the **Chilean fjords**, and the ship stopped for an hour at the Asia glacier on the edge of an ice field.



The next morning we spent in **Punta Arenas** on the shore of the Straits of Magellan. We had lunch at an estancia, or sheep ranch. There we were treated to a cow milking demonstration, gaucho dancing, and a stirring film on the European pioneers of Patagonia. We ate lamb that had been barbecued over an open fire.

Before leaving Punta Arenas we stopped at the city cemetery, which is full of graves of British, Croats, Spanish, Italians, and other nationalities that made up the pioneer settlers.

Needless to say, Magellan is an important historical figure here. There is a legend that if you kiss the toe of the statue of Magellan in the city square, you'll return to Patagonia.

Punta Arenas is "penguin country," although we didn't actually see any until the Falklands.



**Ushuaia** is on the northern shore of the Beagle channel on the island of Tierra del Fuego. Behind Ushuaia are snow-covered mountain peaks, making the town and the surrounding area very scenic.

In the morning, before arriving in the city, we cruised past several glaciers along the channel.

In the afternoon, on a day that was unusually warm and pleasant for this part of the world, we left the ship to tour Tierra del Fuego National Park.

We returned to the park on the Tren del Fin del Mundo (Train at the End of the Earth), which was originally created by prisoners serving their time in the prison, which was the original "settlement" of Ushuaia.

The next morning the ship sailed around the island of **Cape Horn** (which houses a lighthouse/research station) on another (unheard of) sunny day with calm seas.

## Falkland Islands (Malvinas)



When we reached the **Falklands**, we landed at the largest city, Port Stanley. (The entire population of all the islands is only 2500 hearty souls.) Port Stanley is very British with pubs, dart leagues, and the like.

After a short bus ride, we arrived at Gypsy Cove where we got to see several hundred Magellanic penguins, which were going through their annual moult.

There is still evidence of the 1982 Falklands war with Argentina. Even now there are over 100 uncleared mine fields. Argentina still claims “Las Malvinas” (their name for the islands) as their own. Oil was recently discovered on the shelf between the Falklands and Argentina.

The islands have almost no trees; most of the plants are very low-growing because of the wind that blows almost constantly. We happened to be there on a gorgeous, calm day. One of the more interesting plants is Diddle Dee, the berries of which make a tasty jam.

## Argentina and Uruguay



**Buenos Aires**, which is the capital of **Argentina**, is situated at the mouth of the Rio de la Plata. Our ship docked in the busy container port part of the harbor. We were in Buenos Aires two days.

On the first day we toured the city center and saw the main cathedral, the colorful Caminito Street in the La Boca district, the tomb of Eva (Evita) Peron in Recoleta, and the Museo Nacional de Arte Decorativo. In the evening we attended a tango show (plus dinner) at the Esquina Carlos Gardel, who was probably the most famous tango singer.

On the second day we took a bus ride 50 miles out of town to Estancia Santa Susanna where we had lunch (meat, meat, meat – although they don't have many cattle any more – it's all soy!) and a gaucho show. The gauchos showed off their horses that had been trained to follow a lead horse wearing a particular bell, and NOT to follow any horse wearing a different bell. They also showed their horsemanship skills by "spearing" brass rings hung over a track.



**Uruguay** is a small country sandwiched between Argentina and Brazil. Both countries have laid claim to it at various times in history.

**Montevideo** is near Buenos Aires on the Rio de la Plata estuary. A large portion of the city faces one of the many beautiful sandy beaches that stretch for miles. Another feature of the city are the many attractive government buildings whose interiors have been finished with local marble.

We took a tour of the congress building and also a winery on the outskirts of town. During the bus tour (which unfortunately took place during fairly heavy rain) we saw a mansion on embassy row that belongs to the Rev. Sun Myung Moon, who has been accused of money laundering in “the secretive banking haven” of Uruguay.

## **Brazil and Iguazú Falls**



After we left Montevideo, we spent two days at sea traveling to **Rio de Janeiro**. Unlike the rest of the trip, here we got a test of rough seas, with the ship crashing through large swells for most of the two days. Many of the passengers were having problems with sea sickness (luckily we didn't). During the time at sea we both took part in a Susan B. Komen Foundation charity walk around the deck of 11 laps, or 5K.

Sights we saw in Rio included the Carnival celebration parade route, the San Sebastian cathedral, and a cable car ride to the top of Sugar Loaf. The weather was hot and humid.

We also walked the Copacabana and Ipanema beaches, which were close to our hotel, the Luxor Regente. We got to see a beautiful sunset at Ipanema Beach before returning to the hotel for dinner. (Yes, "the girl" is still around, and she's now a grandmother!)

Our final Elderhostel activity was a bus trip to see the Christ the Redeemer statue at Corcovado. After our final lunch (which included samba dancers), we caught a flight for **Iguazú Falls**, and we arrived at our hotel on the Argentine side about 9:00 pm.



At Iguazú Falls we stayed at the Sheraton Hotel on the Argentine side of the falls. We spent most of our time in Iguazú Falls National Park.

We met our tour guide José Luis at 9:00 am for our tour (mostly WALKING tour, thank goodness!) of the falls, where we were joined by Sergei, a Russian tourist. Both José and Sergei spoke multiple languages fluently.

On the first part of the tour, we took the park train to *Garganta del Diablo* (Devil's Throat). There we had a gorgeous panoramic view of the falls. After that we walked along various other trails that offered many other views. We ate lunch with Sergei, who said he likes Putin because things are now stable in Russia and life is predictable. All this was lacking under Yeltsin.

After lunch we were passengers on a Zodiac boat for an adventure cruise that took us close to the falls in several places and then down the Iguazú River. It was great fun and we got soaked!

<iframe src="https://www.youtube.com/embed/9iYF7BEbNv4?rel=0" width="560" height="315" frameborder="0" allowfullscreen="allowfullscreen"></iframe>

In the evening we walked around the hotel grounds and saw many tropical birds, including a flock of parrots heading to their nightly roosting place. After the walk we had dinner on the hotel terrace overlooking the falls. Very nice!

The next morning we did our own walking tour on trails near the hotel. Before we headed for the airport Anna spotted a toucan sitting on a tree near the hotel.

◀ 2008   ◀ ARGENTINA   ◀ ATACAMA DESERT   ◀ BRAZIL   ◀ CAPE HORN   ◀ CHILE   ◀ FALKLAND ISLANDS   ◀ IGUAZU FALLS  
◀ JOHNSON   ◀ LAS MALVINAS   ◀ PATAGONIA   ◀ PHOTOGRAPHY   ◀ ROAD SCHOLAR   ◀ SOUTH AMERICA   ◀ URUGUAY  
◀ USHUAIA   ◀ VAN RAAPHORST