

Thursday 6th November

London, Madrid, Santiago

Last minute preparations at home and two plants across to Audrey for watering. Of course she is worried that they will die on her.

I need to get the three pm bus from the BS and I set out at about 2.45 and just catch a 31 giving me plenty of time in Wycombe. Tesco yield some cold capsules; the others are deep in the bag.

Carousel are happy to accept the pass all the way to the airport and run on time, giving plenty of time in reserve. There is a Ramblers representative at Heathrow, and check in is quick, with bags through to Santiago and both boarding passes. I decide to buy some dollars as an extra reserve. During the time waiting in the lounge I meet up with several on the same tour. The flight to Madrid is efficient but no refreshments and it is difficult to get even water.

Friday 7th

arrival in Santiago

At Madrid there is a bus transfer to the south terminal with again plenty of time for the connection. The large Airbus is virtually full but only one child so peaceful. We take off at about 12.15 CET and after about two hours a meal is served - it seems an odd time, but about right for Chile, 3 hours behind GMT, four behind CET. The meal is pasta, fruit, sweet, wine, tea and water, adequate.

The flight is relatively comfortable, but thirteen hours.

Breakfast is served about 1.5 h before landing - bread, fruit, ham, cheese, coffee. The approach to Santiago has views of the Andes, but my aisle see it not too convenient for them. At the airport, it takes time for the plane to empty and we are at the back. Forms for immigration are supplied on the plane.

Immigration is swift and there is a cash machine which works. Baggage recall is OK but a problem at the last minute; I thought that I had got rid of all my apples but one is found and I have to pay a fine (37GBP) after about an hour of waiting and negotiation, with the tour leader Hazel helping. We had met here as we were leaving the airport. The fine is the lowest possible, as they accept what I say.

Hazel and I take a taxi to the hotel, the rest of the group having left for the hotel in the coach. The taxi costs \$10.000 from the Ramblers' budget.

At the hotel the group is still waiting for the rooms which will not be ready till 1pm and it is now only twelve. So we decide to leave the bags and bring forward our lunch at a local diner and then come back to the hotel for check in.

The restaurant is cheap and cheerful with a long formica table. Chicken and avocado salad and two glasses of red wine costs 4.000 with a tip. Back to the hotel and just time for a bath and some unpacking before we go for our sightseeing walk around the centre, including the government offices, cathedral, post office (stamps at \$410) and a museum with a large, very long table with a map of the long thin country. The previous clouds that we had seen from the plane and been surrounded by on the ground had melted away and the sun is shining and with a breeze it is very pleasant and warm.

Back to the hotel for a rest and change and then it is out to dinner at a local restaurant. The affects of the flight and lack of sleep are catching up, headache and stomach disorder but the meal helps - steak, salad, chips, pisco sour, wine and appetisers looking rather like samosas but not spicy. Included in the holiday. There is a cool breeze, sun setting on the way to the restaurant and finally dark on return at nine. ASTB for a decent night, broken but a lot of sleep. AC on, with noise from the street.

Diego de Almagro Hoteles

Saturday 8th

Santiago to Pucón

Up at 6.45, bath and down for breakfast at 7.15. Margaret is already there and we have breakfast together, comparing notes on previous trips and reading. The breakfast is fine with cereals, fruit, coffee (instant) or tea, ham, cheese, bread, cakes. Afterwards I book a room for the 3rd December for my return. No deals, 107USD.

At nine we leave for another walk around town, with the main visit to the museum of pre Colombian Art which at 3.000 is interesting but a bit specialised. Certainly well presented. As we walk there I spot two bookshops and one of them is near to the museum and I return and buy some trekking maps at about 1.110 each. There are four that cover areas that we are visiting. Later I see them at the airport, but 50% dearer. The museum is on the same road as the Iberia office but I don't see it. (I shall need it for reconfirming my ticket)

At the museum there is a very pleasant courtyard cafe where a bucketful of hot chocolate is available. From there we head for the main square where a band is reputedly playing, but they have taken a rest before we get there. Bagpipes are in evidence.

From there we make our way back to the hotel, pick up the luggage and get a bus to the airport. The flight is at 1500 and after check in there is plenty of time for looking around and finding a shop where there is an opportunity for tasting chocolates and coffee!

The flight turns out to be very comfortable with a newish plane and a snack on board.

Visibility is good but towards Temecco there are plenty of clouds and when we land it is damp and there are lots of clouds.

There is a coach waiting to take us to Pucon (1.5hrs). The driver says that it has been raining torrentially, but the forecast is drier for the next few days. The scenery gets better as we approach Villarrica on the lake, but the tops of the mountains are well hidden. The road to Pucon is along the lake and the hotel is on the far side of the town. The room is small but comfortable and after unpacking and a bath I go exploring and find a supermarket for some lunch stuff. This is achieved and soon after return it is time for a drink and dinner. The glass of red at 2.000 comes in a huge glass and is very tasty and lasts well into dinner. The latter is tomato salad, beef, roasted vegetables and a rather distinctive type of apple pie - shredded apples on an eggy base with mint and red wine sauces. A bottle of water comes with the meal. Dinner starts at eight and by 9.20 I'm ready for bed and make my excuses. However it is not a good night's sleep with a rather warm room.

Sunday 9th Pucón

Eventually up at 6.30 and after bath and rucksack preparation and a short walk it is time for breakfast at eight. The buffet is plentiful with cereals, cheese, ham, scrambled egg, good bread, jam, fresh orange juice, coffee and cakes (but no room).

We get underway at 9.15, first of all to the supermarket (el tit) for provisions and then to the gate of the national park. This takes about an hour in the bus with the latter part being up a very rough and steep track. The question is asked if an English bus driver would take his bus up such a track. The weather is cool with plenty of clouds with some wind but quite bright and good visibility. As the day progresses it gets better until the afternoon is warm with a lot of sun; indeed the sky is clear blue apart from round the volcano.

From the bus's parking place we continue initially up the same track through the woods but we soon leave the latter behind and the view widens around and in particularly back down to the Lago Villarrica, although the volcanic peak, Volcán Villarrica, in front is well hidden. Soon the path is steep and the way a scramble across the volcanic soil and rocks. The wind gets up and it is quite cool and lunch is taken behind rocks. From there, at the snow line (about 1400m, the lake is at 200m) we cross a small snow field and head down across the lava fields and eventually finding a more or less level path back to the original track and down to the bus. During the descent the weather is clearing and soon there is a fleeting view of the summit behind. Back at the bus it is warm and sunny.

It takes about half an hour to drive back to Pucón where most of us leave the bus to explore the town which is very pleasant in the sun. Obviously it is ready for plenty of tourists but

this early in the season it is quiet, but with most restaurants and a lot of shops open. The shores of the lake are worthy of exploration with black gritty soil, a promenade for walkers and excellent views across the lake and into the mountains. By now the sky is clear and the sun hot. The return to the hotel is via the town, finding some postcards en route. Dinner is much the same as yesterday fine but slow and again to bed at 9.30 and rather better sleep.

Monday 10th

Pucón

Again the day dawns fine and sunny. After visiting the Eltit supermarket for lunch, we head off in the coach to Calburgua at the foot of the lake where there is a small beach and a few cafe/shops, but many are still closed with the season yet to start. We have two walks, the first starting from the beach and up a steep, stony road through farmland before branching off up a track through the forest. We are directed along a track under a barbed wire fence by a man with a wheelbarrow. Perhaps it's private. The views back to the lake are good and we pass one tarn but the second is shy. The forest path is pleasant with pine needles under foot. On the way back down to the coach, there are excellent long views to the Villarica volcano which is clear of clouds today. At the lake we have coffee in the shop (instant) and lunch with beer, again from the shop. After a short coach ride and parking by the cemetery, back towards Pucón and then off on a side road there is about 6km of valley walking along the track through undulating farmland with views of the volcano and with excellent clarity.

The culmination is a waterfall before reboarding the bus at the cemetery for the ride home. Dinner is soup and salmon trout with rice with Pisco Sour and white wine to drink.

Tuesday 11th

Pucón

Breakfast is as before and after a false start at nine without camera we drive in a minibus, first returning to Lago Tinquileo and some loose tracks which are narrow and bumpy to about 750m which takes about an hour and a half.

From here the path is excellent through forest with lots of bamboo and eventually monkey puzzles; initially level but then after the check point steeply up with lots of zig zags. I take a side trip to the base of the falls Nido D'Agulla about 400 off the path and well worth the deviation with the huge rocks. After rejoining the main path I get up to the Lago Chico (big or small?) at 1200m and then to Lago Torro for lunch. I pass some of the crew en route, but it seems that others have made a different detour and join the lunch party later.

From here it is over a saddle to Lago Verde and then back to the valley, partly by the same path, at 4.30 for hot chocolate and excellent raspberry cake for \$3.600. The others gradually arrive for their refreshments and we take the minibus back to the hotel arriving at about 6.30.

Wednesday 12th

Pucón to Puerto Varas

Up at seven and starting packing takes care of the time until breakfast at eight, which is the usual. The weather is sunny again, with a clear blue sky. Initially it is a bit cool but soon warms up.

After breakfast and final packing we get away by nine and head for Pucón where some want the bank and I find the Post Office for posting cards. I later find that the \$410 is surface mail and airmail costs \$500. I wonder when they will arrive? Soon we are back on the road, first going back to Villarica along the lakeside and then westwards to join the motorway and then south. It's quite soporific and I'm in and out of sleep until we stop at a service station for a break. By now the sky is cloudy and the temperature lower; soon after we start, the sun reappears.

At about 1.30 we reach the lakeside town of Frutillar on Lake Llanquihue looking across to

the snowy mountains and volcanoes including Osorno. The place is beautiful with a clear sky but a keen wind. Several of us go to the Guten Appetit as recommended in the Footprint Guide and plenty of excellent salads appear with lots of asparagus, palm hearts and avocado pears. A glass of red complements the food.

After lunch I use most of the time to visit the German settlers' museum which is first rate and very similar to a Freilichtsmuseum with two fully reconstructed houses with interiors, a working smithy and a barn with a lot of farm and domestic implements. Even many of the plants in the grounds are labelled and of course many are in full flower; the height of spring.

After the museum the waterfront is attractive. Several people are bathing but the wind is still keen. I find several of the crew waiting for coffee and tea in the new concert hall that is being built. The service is slow so I don't join them and soon the bus comes to find us.

The hall is in a prime waterside site with wonderful views across to the volcanoes; will anyone concentrate on the music. The festival is coming up in January, will the hall be ready? There is youth choir practising in one of the rooms.

It is only a half hour to Puerto Varas and the hotel is expecting us with all the key cards and forms ready. Only the room safe causes a problem but that is soon sorted by one of the friendly staff.

After a bath and some laundry (which dries quickly) typing up this diary and then to dinner - welcome pisco sour (not so good as before), salad, seafood risotto, cake with wine included.

Thursday 13th Puerto Varas

Another bright clear day dawns, but after not such a good night. After the usual offices, it's down to breakfast which is from seven. Not bad, but the coffee is stewed (or the urn not properly cleaned). There is plenty of time to go into town for lunch provisions (bakery, supermarket) before leaving the hotel at 9.15. It is quite a long drive - two hours after stopping for photographs across the lake to the first volcano and then road works. However it is worth it and the views across the lake (Lago Todos los Santos) is first rate including snowy peaks all the way to the Argentinian border.

The walk is not too strenuous, along forest tracks with occasional clearings and views of the mountains and lake around. There is a keen breeze which is welcome with the bright, strong sun. After an hour or so heading gently uphill there is a clearing and excellent views across the lake; an obvious spot for lunch. An hour easily passes and then it is a gentle stroll to the lakeside via a dry water course, and then along the strand. The sand is very dark and gritty: from the volcano. A pleasant path inland takes us back to the parking space and a German style hotel for Kaffe und Kuchen (excellent Sandkuchen) before the coach ride back to Puerto Varas. Not quite so long as no one wants to stop for the waterfalls and there doesn't seem to be much work on the road works.

Back at the hotel the routine is as normal although the other group has left and the dining room is not so busy and not so noisy.

Friday 14th Puerto Varas

An early start - the bus is due to leave at eight and it is even a little early. The drive is fairly long - south to Puerto Mott and then to Pargua for the ferry across to Chilloé island. We have to wait in a queue for a while and so there is time to take a leg stretcher and enjoy the sea air. Again the weather is sunny with a near clear blue sky and quite warm but also quite a breeze. After about half an hour, we get onto the ferry and the journey takes about another half hour, across the rather choppy Canal de Chacao. From the other side on the island a beautiful drive starts; initially about 25km to Ancud, the main town on the north of the island. There is a museum which has some interesting photos of the earthquake and before around 1910 and a few artifacts. Then there is just time to visit the rather more interesting market, with all sorts of vegetables, fruit and more predominantly fish and seaweed.

Back on the bus the drive to Bahía Cocotué is very fine with beautiful sea views as the road gets rougher and ends with a ford and a drive across the beach to stop at the restaurant where we are to have lunch. But first there is the boat trip to view the penguins. First we have to don chest waders and life jackets for the open boats but it turns out that the 4.000 ride isn't far off shore. We see two sorts of penguins - Humboldt and ??, pelicans, otters etc.

The speciality at lunch turns out to have lots of shell fish and I opt for a nice large slab of white fish with potatoes and salad, which plenty of white wine. After lunch there is just time for a walk along the beach and a clamber over the rocks to view the scenery though the very clear air before re boarding the coach at 3.30. The journey back is by the same route but that is no hardship and the 3.5 hrs passes agreeably enough with plenty to see and read.

There is a reasonable wait to board the ferry and we get back about 7.15 and have dinner at 8.15. More seafood for starters, pork with mash and a very nice sauce and a rather anonymous cake for postres.

Saturday 15th Puerto Varas

Again the weather is fine; cloudy and cool to start with, but clearing and getting warmer, with a pleasant breeze. Breakfast at seven and then a walk around the station (now an art gallery, but track, platforms and water towers still in place) and town. All the cash machines appear to be behind doors so no cash this morning.

It is a leisurely start at 9.15 with a drive to Puerto Montt, but along the normal road, not the motorway of yesterday. Hazel stops for cash in the town which appears bright and prosperous on the Pacific coast with lots of new office buildings. Then we head south along the coast before soon turning inland to Correntosa along the Río Chamiza, giving a policeman's wife a lift. The area is largely farming with cattle and sheep but after the village the forest starts and we enter the Parque Nacional Alerce Andino, with lots of different trees including the Andean Larch (Alerce).

We leave the bus at the office after the two hour drive and head up the forest road into the park and soon take a signposted path off to the right. The paths are well signposted and the conditions underfoot mostly good with plenty of boards in the boggy bits. After about an hour and a fair number of steps up and down we get to the Laguna Sargazo which is wonderfully situated nestled in the densely wooded slopes and sparkling in the sunlight. We manage a snack sitting on the rocks before retracing our steps to the path junction and heading in a new direction, across a river and up lots of wooden steps to a lookout point (a Mirador) where the rest of lunch happens with a rest. Some missed out on the steps and took lunch at the picnic tables provided. After that a forest road takes us to a nature path with lots of trees and shrubs identified and a minor waterfall before returning to the coach and the drive home in 1.5 hours with just a stop for photos. In town a cash machine in the supermarket yields the readyies.

Sunday 16th

Fly Puerto Montt to Punta Arenas, north to Puerto Natales

It is an early start with breakfast at 6.15 and ready to leave the hotel at 7.15. I am able to get rid of shrapnell when paying hotel dues (\$800 for water). The bus takes us to the airport via the motorway to Puerto Montt and then on the Chiloé road. The airport is efficient and modern

and again there is free coffee and chocolates to try.

The flight takes about two hours landing at the airport to the north of Punta Arenas after a snack en route. En route, soon after Puerto Montt we could see the smoke plumes from the active volcano (Chitoen?). In general the views are good but later there are plenty of clouds. Landing at Punta Arenas is smooth and the landscape is completely different. The clarity is extreme and the views are wide and there is the constant wind. It's the first time that I've thought that the bright sun is in the **north** east.

We head north along the road avoiding Punta Arenas. There is a lot of road but very few

vehicles which are mostly coaches. After an hour and a half we stop at the Reubens which is a disorganised cafe with small portions (salad and beer) where someone had forgotten to pass on the telephone message of our imminence. Puerto Natales is another three quarters of an hour with a brief stop for shopping in the town, but the hotel turns out to be just along the street, alongside the fjord and with wonderful views of the mountains.

The room again is small and around the back with a shower and little storage space. Soon Lorna, Carol and I go to the Patagonia Dulce for carrot cake and excellent hot chocolate with Pisco. Afterwards it is a walk along the front for photographs in the evening light. After a shower it is dinner overlooking the bay and eventually sunset at 9.15.

Monday 17th

Puerto Natales

Another early start: breakfast at 6.30, bus at 7.25 to the pier for the eight am boat (more like 8.15 departure). It is bright but plenty of high and flat cloud. As the day progresses the sun comes out and the temperature rises.

The boat ride is about three hours along the fjord and we drop off staff and food and food at the place where we are to return for lunch. There is plenty to see and the views get better. Coffee with a bun and then Pisco is supplied (I get several glasses of the latter passed on). The lounge is comfortable; outside it is bracing with nowhere to sit. The fjord is the 'Seno Ultima Esperanza' leading to the 'Parque Nacional Bernardo O'Higgins' via the Balmaceda glacier which was down to the sea in 1986 but is now much receded. About an hour later at Puerto Torro we get off an hour and a half to explore including the easy walk from the shore above the glacial lake with its icebergs to the snout along an easy path. The ride back to the Estancia Loberia takes another hour and a half for lunch in an idyllic spot

beneath the snowy mountains amongst the very green pastures and streams and in the warm sun. The indoor BBQ is not bad with vegetable soup and tinned fruit salad. We head back to the hotel by six. There is time for getting another map (1:50,000 but just an enlargement of the other) and a visit to the Patagonia Dulce.

Tuesday 18th

Puerto Natales to Torres del Paine

A more leisurely start today; 7.30 breakfast for nine departure. But Clive goes to the post office and after backwards and forwards with coach and individuals it is 9.35 before we leave.

We head north and stop at Cerro Castillo for coffee and souvenirs. It is very much a border town with Argentina very close; the black coffee is good and I get postcards and a mug. From here it is north and east to the National Park border on Lake Sarmiento where there are plenty of guanaco near to the road. After a rather broad and empty landscape the outlook gets better with views of the peaks shrouded in the mist. After various stops for photos we head for Salte Grande where we walk from the bus to a lunch spot and then an hour's walk to the Mirador Cuernos for the view across Lago Nordenskjöld to the Torres. After walking back to the bus we ride to the Camping Pehoe for tea by the lakeside and then on to the Hostel Tyndall, just outside the park and with a stunning view across to the peaks. The building is large and wooden and appears impressive but is expensive with shoddy management. There is an argument over the passports, the food is mediocre and the place is noisy.

Wednesday 19th

Torres del Paine

The weather is even better with bright sun all day with a few clouds and a persistent high wind.

After a poor and leisurely breakfast and a walk around the park taking photographs we leave at 9.30 with a huge packed lunch: two egg/tuna sandwiches, apple, juice, water,

chocolate and muesli bars. We first drive to the park information centre for the displays and views across the Lago del Torro. After that the path starts north west and into the teeth of the wind. But it's a good easy path which is largely level and several sheltered stopping for snacking. After about three hours including a lunch stop we reach a Mirador overlooking Lago Pehoe across to the Torres which are clear and virtually cloud free and show every detail. In the foreground is Lago Pehoe with islands and a brilliant turquoise colour and is obviously melt-water. After a short break six of us head off on the next section to the catamaran landing stage and hotel. The way is more interesting with several rocky outcrops and takes just under an hour. Three of us head up the path towards the Grey Glacier but it soon becomes clear that there is not time (2 hours) available to get to see it. However there are views back down the valley to the lake. We return to the hotel with thoughts of refreshments but they look poor and expensive. We return along the lake on the catamaran (11.000) in half an hour with instant coffee served and then it takes 50 min by bus back to the hotel. We get back at eight for dinner and bed.

Thursday 20th Torres del Paine

The routine and breakfast are the same and we depart for a bus ride of 75mins at nine to the National Park entry at Lago Sarmiento de Gamboa. The weather is not so good as yesterday; some sun and again a brisk wind. From the road the way is to the north along a good path but into the wind. After 50 mins I have a rest with a sandwich and a herd of guanaco and then the rest catch up and there is another hour to the next road with spectacular views of the peaks and a little rock at the end. We eat lunch at the Estancia Armaga in return for buying a drink (beer at 2.000).

After lunch the walk seems a make weight - up and over moors to a waterfall that the bus reached in 4km. But a condor is sighted. The weather is closing in and the Torres disappear. On the bus back a few spots of rain appear but the brightness returns and we are back to the hotel at five. It's good to have time to read and write postcards.

Friday 21st Torres del Paine

We set out at nine for the 50min drive to the Guaderia Lago Grey where a short walk leads to a viewpoint of the Lago Grey. Initially the path is sheltered by trees and crosses a suspension bridge with a limit of six people and sways considerably. The path soon leads down to a shingle beach at the end of the lake with views to the lake with views to the glacier and wind sculptured ice bergs of a wonderful blue colour. At the end of the beach there is a circular walk around an 'almost' island with several views to the glacier and up to the Torres. It is back to the bus for a short hop to the Hotel Lago Grey for an expensive (2.500) cup of hot chocolate before back to for another walk, this time up the Pingu valley which has a good path, well wooded and often sheltered. There is campsite, waterfalls and a steep section through the woods.

Saturday 22nd Torres del Paine to Punta Arenas

Another early start: breakfast at seven, packing, luggage at eight and leave at 8.20. We drive out of the park along the 'new' road, south and much shorter than the way we came in on and along the shores of Lago del Toro, a huge lake. It is an interesting and highly scenic route, eventually joining the road to Puerto Natales.

First we stop at Cueva Milodon, vaguely interesting (the cave site of the animal) but with a good viewpoint.

At Puerto Natales there is time for a quick chocolate cappuccino and banana cake at Patagonia Dulce before continuing on the bus to Punta Arenas. The weather is bright with clouds blowing around and exceptional clarity. After an hour we have a stop at a little restaurant for asparagus soup and home made bread before going on for arrival in P A at

4.15. We check in and the room is a good size with a full size bath.

There is time to for exploring - down to the water side which is difficult to get to because of building a new road and the navy. But there is eventually a view of the Magellan Straits and the Tierra del Fuego. Then north through the suburbs to the cemetery which is an eclectic mixture of kitsch (so many plastic flowers), children's tombs, large mausoleums, modern 'cupboard' tombs, English area (Tom, 15, died at sea of an accident) and Sara Braun's elaborate tomb.

Dinner at 8.30. Soup, good salmon, veg and sweet and then to bed.

Sunday 23rd

Fly Punta Arenas to Santiago

There is no hurry: breakfast at 7.30 and out to see the cathedral, harbour, Tierra del Fuego and a Hindu Temple and then back to the hotel for final packing and departure at ten for the airport and the flight back to Santiago, about four hours with a break at Puerto Montt. Again the flight is comfortable with two snacks and we arrive at 3.30 for a coach transfer to the hotel with a cheerful guide who is encouraging about luggage storage and the bus to Mendoza.

After the check in at the hotel I confirm that they will store luggage and they ring the bus station, but I have to get the ticket in person. But the terminal is less than five minutes away and the ticket for 9.30 tomorrow at 17.500 is soon bought.

Then there is time for the internet, a bath, final packing, final work on my summing up speech and dividing the luggage.

We gather at eight for Pisco Sours. the speech goes well and a good dinner follows: corn soup, fish and steamed veg, ice cream and a share of a bottle wine with Lorna and Mavis. And so to bed, but little sleep, my head is very active.

Monday 24th

Up at 6.30 and breakfast at seven with a succession joining me at breakfast and wishing me well and giving email addresses for photos to follow. I finish packing and leave a rucksack with the bellboy and after checking email I leave at 9.30.

At the bus station I get a cheese sandwich for \$850. The sky is clear blue; another beautiful day. The bus arrives at 9.15 and is only about a quarter full and so I can have as double seat - ideal for luggage and sight seeing and photography. It is about an hour and a half to Los Andes for a ten minute stop and then we start climbing into the mountains. In the valley the vegetation is luxuriant and it gradually changes and flowering cacti appear and the river is a raging torrent in the valley bottom. There is a narrow gauge railway, still in use here for goods, but soon it is defunct. the mountains appear with snow on tops, but mostly rock with large scree slopes.

After a settlement there are two huge sets of zig zags with increasing views. There are the remains of the railway, unused, in unlikely places. At the Chilean customs there is a brief halt and then more zig zaps to the tunnel mouth. The tunnel takes about ten minutes and then after a few more minutes there is the Argentinian customs post here Chilean and Argentinian formalities take place in a total of three quarters of an hour. The valley down is very different with sweeping curves in a big, arid land with glimpse towards Aconcagua. It is a desert with some irrigated patches all the way to Mendoza. the last stretch is northwards along the motorway to the large city and the well organised bust station in the hot and sunny weather. I get A\$600 (about £120) from the cash machine and walk in a quarter of an hour to the Hostel Winca which has a small hot room with two beds for \$85. I settle in, shower and go out for a look around and supper. There are lots of pavement cafes and the city seems pleasant and busy with lots of trees. I get a pizza, water, two glasses of white. Back at the hostel I use the internet and then to bed, but with little sleep.

Tuesday 25th

Up at 6.30 to a bright sunny day and after a shower a breakfast of cornflakes, weak juice,

coffee and sweet croissants.

First of all I get my ticket for Viña del Mar for Thursday (as there is no through bus to La Serena on that day) at 18.000, 9.30. After another walk around the city, I get a second breakfast at a pavement cafe: fresh juice, good coffee and croissants for \$7. Then it is a stroll up to the University and the park where an information map is available. After a walk around the lake I have lunch: buffet starters, lomo, odd sweet and a half bottle of Malbec - very nice. After heading for Cero Gloriosa disaster strikes: police, hospital. Back to the hostel at ten and swap room to one with a fan.

Wednesday 26th **Resting in Mendoza**

Virtually no sleep and sore and tired (no painkillers). No shower, but breakfast as before. Back to bed and spend most of the morning resting, except for a visit to the pharmacy with one of the helpers for the rest of the medicines.

Lunch at Meson Español, tortilla but not too hungry. Back to hostel, and again mostly rest. A better night.

Thursday 27th **Mendoza to Viña del Mar**

Still rather sore, but at least some sleep. up at 7 for a rather difficult shower and then packing. Breakfast at 7.30 - as before but no juice. Pleasant outside before the heat. To the pharmacy for plasters and then bill settling (A\$255) and walk to the bus station where the bus is, as marked on the ticket, at platform 20. Spot on time we leave with the bus quarter full again. At least I can spread out and try to get comfortable. The route is the reverse of before and it is enjoyable to relax and look at the scenery and not worry about photos. Coffee, biscuit and cold drink served. After about 3 hours we reach the tunnel and then as the book suggests all the paperwork is at the Chilean post. About 1.75 hours of waiting, officials and money changing. The e ticket is not needed. the weather in the Chilean valley is overcast but brightens as we leave the mountains. Sandwiches and biscuit served. The scenery is pleasant but not dramatic.

At about 5.15 we get to Viña del Mar and pull into the bus station as marked on the map. I walk through the down town area and up to the Offenbacher Hof hotel. It seems closed but when I ring the bell at the gate there is an answer and they have a room for three nights at \$25.000 with breakfast. The owner speaks German (which makes life easier) and comes from Offenbach near Frankfurt am M. The room is largish with shower and comfortable.

After a rest and some laundry and shower it is out for dinner (Cafe Journal with the students, fettuccini, juice and water for 4.800) and a short walk and then back for an early night. The room is cool, reasonably quiet and therefore a long and not too disturbed night.

Friday 28th

Breakfast at eight on the terrace - lots of good coffee, yogurt, oats, fresh fruit, fresh juice, jam and rolls.

After a rest, out for a walk around the hill and along the coast with time for photos in the bright sun, but it is not so warm as in Mendoza. There is time for a stop for a hot chocolate at a beach cafe and then I head back towards town and eventually to Las Delicias del Mar at one for lunch: Fresh raspberry juice, water, butter fish with asparagus and parmesan (small but excellent) and creme brulee.

Walk into town for internet, book the bus to La Serena (Sunday at 10.35) and then back to the Offenbacher Hof for a relaxing afternoon and an early night (good rest).

Saturday 29th

The same good breakfast and plenty of time in room reading. Then out to the post office with postcards and to wards museum but rucksack is open and no guidebook. After hurrying

back to the hotel I find the guide but can't be bothered to go out again. Snack on biscuits, chocolate and empanadas and more reading , then an early but poor night.

Sunday 30th

After breakfast and a walk in the early sun reading and then to the bus station at 9.30, calling at the supermarket for provisions. The bus leaves on time at 10.35 and after picking up a lot of passengers in the suburbs we hit the motorway north through more interesting scenery through very arid, rolling hills. There is a half hour stop for lunch and another at Coquimbo. By now the weather is overcast with thick cloud over the whole area and it is another twenty minutes to La Serena. From the bus station it is a short walk to El Punto hostel but it is full, although I book for the 1st and 2nd (21.000, 10.000). Gregorio down the road is also full but Momma has a room for tonight at 8.000. The house is a twenty minute walk through the dead town, meeting a man who studied English in Brighton. The little room is fine, overlooking the central sitting area, and only Spanish is spoken. The hosts go out to the supermarket and after some reading I head out for dinner at eight at the Bavaria with Salmon, salads etc. Back at the El Punto I book a trip to the Elqui valley for Tuesday (not Monday, which is a pity as the museums are closed). Back to the room for an OK night, having switched off the electricity on arrival.

Monday 1st December

I shower and pay and leave at eight, taking my bag to El Punto. From there I go the bus station to buy a ticket to Santiago; Wednesday at 8am, six hours and 10.000 but unfortunately not to the best terminal.

The weather again is overcast and not too warm. I take some photos, particularly of the churches with their various towers, 'for the record' and spend an hour in a cyber cafe. I walk the two km to the beach but it's deserted, windy and grey. I manage an instant coffee and cake at the hotel and then head back to town to look for lunch. Govidas doesn't seem interested, the first Italian is closed, the second is now a pizza take away and so it's back to Bavaria for a schnitzel and salad. By now it is 2pm and so I can claim the room at El Punto and it turns out to be a very nice double with a shower and overlooking the courtyard. I do some reading and laundry by which time the sun has come out and so I make a trip out for better photos. There is a local history museum open which is interesting and then after getting some water I go back to the Hostal for an early and reasonable night.

Tuesday 2nd

The breakfast is OK but with instant coffee at eight and I am ready for the tour collection from 8.30. They arrive at 8.50 for two of us (the other is another Martin from the Netherlands) to join the minibus. There are three more pickups and then the driver/guide, George, does introductions and then heads eastwards and into the sun leaving the clouds behind. Apparently all the weather is predictable, even to where the clouds will end. The valley starts six kilometres wide and gradually narrows. We visit a viewpoint up a narrow road and a Papaya farm shop and then next we stop at the dam wall, built for irrigation. After that it is along the valley which has all sorts of fruit and three sorts of grape, for eating, for wine and for Pisco.

The next stop is at the Pisco distillery near Vicuña where George shows us around and explains the process. After that we go up the valley to Pisco Elqui for lunch which is slow but adequate. The views are good in the village and of the valley. The sun is intense but it is very dry and there is plenty of wind. Afterwards we return the way we came, visiting Monte Grande and Vicuña, both of which have churches that are open. We get back to La Serena at 6.45 in time for tea and cake.

Wednesday 3rd

Back to Santiago

Thursday 4th

Flight Santiago to Madrid

Friday 5th

Flight Madrid to London