



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

BACKGROUND

Land and Climate

Because it is so narrow, Chile may seem smaller than it actually is. Although its average width is about 112 miles (180 kilometers), the country's total area is 291,933 square miles (756,102 square kilometers)—making it slightly larger than Texas. Chile's territory includes 2,672 miles (4,300 kilometers) of South America's western coast and several islands: Isla de Pascua (Easter Island), Isla Sala y Gómez (Sala and Gómez Island), and Islas Juan Fernández (Juan Fernández Islands). Chile also lays claim to a 480,000-square-mile (1.24 million-square-kilometer) disputed section of Antarctica, claimed by Britain as well.

Because of its north-to-south length, Chile has many different climates and landscapes. The climate ranges from arid desert in the north to temperate in the central region and subarctic in the south. The landscape includes deserts, swamps, forests, the Andes Mountains, lakes, beaches, rich agricultural regions, volcanoes, and a wide variety of plants and animals. Chile has been called the “Switzerland of South America” for its natural beauty. The country is subject to relatively frequent earthquakes and resulting tidal waves. A 2009 eruption of the Chaitén volcano spewed ash over hundreds of miles and prompted the evacuation of an entire town. Because Chile lies in the Southern Hemisphere,

summer is between December and March.

History

The Incas from Peru were the first “explorers” of Chile, arriving in the north by the mid-15th century. They encountered the native Atacameño, Diaguita, Araucanian, and Mapuche cultures. The Portuguese sailor Ferdinand Magellan became the first European to sight Chilean shores in 1520, after successfully navigating around the southern tip of the American continent. Diego de Almagro claimed Chile as part of the Spanish Empire in 1536, and in 1541 Pedro de Valdivia commenced the Spanish conquest despite strong resistance by Araucanians. Chileans now revere many early indigenous warriors, like Caupolicán and Lautaro, as national heroes.

Chile began fighting for independence from Spain in 1810. Although initial revolts were suppressed, Chilean patriots eventually joined with the armies of José de San Martín in Argentina. In 1817, San Martín's forces invaded Chile by crossing the Andes Mountains. The Spanish were quickly defeated, and one of the revolution's heroes, Bernardo O'Higgins, became supreme dictator of the new republic. Opposed in land reform and other reform efforts, O'Higgins left the country in 1823, and Chilean politics remained unstable for several years. After 1830, however, stability and periodic reform allowed Chile to make progress. From 1879 to 1884, Chile fought the War of the Pacific against Peru and

Bolivia. When Chile won the war, it annexed the provinces of Tarapaca and Antofagasta, in the north, leaving Bolivia landlocked.

A civil war in 1891 was followed by less stable governments and military interventions. Chile returned to constitutional rule in 1932 with the reelection of President Arturo Alessandri. During most of the 20th century, Chile focused on promoting economic growth and addressing social problems.

By 1970, many people believed socialism could solve some of those problems without hindering growth, and soon Salvador Allende became the first freely elected Marxist president in South America. But the country soon faced economic disaster, and in 1973, General Augusto Pinochet Ugarte led a military coup, covertly aided by the United States, that ended Allende's government.

Backed by the military, Pinochet ruled by decree until, in 1988, he subjected himself to a plebiscite to determine if he should continue in power. Upon losing, he called for elections in December 1989. Pinochet's choice for president was defeated by the centrist-left candidate, Patricio Aylwin Azocar. Aylwin took office in 1990 as the first elected president since 1970. While Pinochet's rule was characterized by a dictatorial government and human-rights abuses—including the deaths or disappearances of at least 3,150 dissidents—Pinochet is credited for building a successful and productive economy. Aylwin built on that foundation, facilitating Chile's development as one of the most prosperous Latin American countries. He is credited with implementing successful antipoverty programs and maintaining a delicate balance between opposing political forces.

Later leaders emphasized more social spending for education and antipoverty measures. They also pursued closer economic ties with North and South America and constitutional reforms to reduce the military's political influence. Under these reforms, Chilean presidents are no longer permitted to serve two consecutive terms and they are allowed to fire military commanders. In 2006, Chile elected its first female president, Michelle Bachelet, whose father died in prison during the Pinochet era and who was temporarily imprisoned herself. The government remains focused on building the nation's economy and social services as well as exposing the fate of and compensating the families of those who disappeared during the Pinochet regime. Pinochet died in 2006 without acknowledging his alleged role in these disappearances.

In February 2010, a powerful earthquake struck central Chile, killing hundreds and displacing thousands more. Later in the year, international attention was riveted on the successful rescue of 33 miners trapped underground for two months.

THE PEOPLE

Population

Chile's population of around 16.75 million is growing annually at nearly .9 percent, one of the lowest growth rates

among South American countries. About 89 percent of the population lives in urban areas. More than one out of every three Chileans lives in the Santiago metropolitan region. About 95 percent of the people either have European heritage or are of mixed European-indigenous descent. Many groups descend from Middle Eastern immigrants. Only about 5 percent are purely indigenous (mostly Mapuche). Many Chileans have ancestry from Spain, France, Germany, Switzerland, Croatia, Italy, Russia, Syria, or Lebanon.

Language

Spanish, called *Castellano*, is the official language. But as in all South American countries, some terms common to Chile do not have the same meaning elsewhere. Chileans commonly add a suffix (-ito) to words and names to form diminutives and to show affection. For example, *Chaoito* is a “small good-bye,” while *Carlitos* means “little Carlos” or “dear Carlos.” English is taught in many schools and is understood by some Chileans with more formal education. Small minority groups also speak German (in southern Chile) and Mapuche. A Polynesian dialect called Pascuense or Rapa Nui is spoken on Easter Island.

Religion

Eighty-seven percent of Chileans profess a Christian faith. About 70 percent of the population belongs to the Roman Catholic Church. Most other people belong to various Protestant groups. There is a small Jewish minority, and many indigenous peoples follow traditional religious beliefs. Church and state are separate, and religious freedom is guaranteed.

General Attitudes

Although naturally friendly and warm, Chileans may be shy and reserved when first meeting someone. They are known for their sharp, witty, and somewhat cynical sense of humor. For this and their cultural and educational refinements, they are sometimes called the “British of South America.” Chileans are very patriotic and take pride in their nation's cultural, educational, and economic achievements. When asked how they view Chile and its future, people commonly express confidence and optimism. However, their cynicism might express itself in a slight reservation or a biting remark about the country, its politics, or its inhabitants. Chileans consider themselves Americans (people from the Americas) and refer to people from the United States as *norteamericanos* and Canadians as *canadienses*.

The country has a large middle class, and education enables many poorer people to excel and build a better life. Chileans are a pragmatic people who believe in progress. Years of human-rights abuses under dictatorships have created a strong desire for social justice among the citizens. At the same time, Chile has a relatively rigid class structure in which European descendants are granted higher social status than those of indigenous heritage.

Personal Appearance

Fashions follow European styles and are quite sophisticated in urban areas. North American fashions are also popular,

particularly among the youth. Many commercial entities (banks, department stores, etc.) require their employees to wear uniforms, usually a stylish suit or dress. Individuals take considerable pride in their appearance. Even in rural areas, where people are not as wealthy, it is important to be bathed and neatly dressed in ironed clothes. Although lower-income people may wear secondhand clothing from the United States, sloppy or tattered clothing is considered to be in poor taste.

CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

Greetings

Greetings in Chile are important because they stress that one is welcome and recognized. The *abrazo* is the most common greeting among friends and relatives. It consists of a handshake and hug, supplemented with a kiss to the right cheek for women and family members. Eye contact is considered essential when greeting.

Traditional verbal greetings include *¿Cómo estás?* (How are you?) and *Gusto de verte* (Nice to see you). Chileans show significant outward affection to friends and relatives. The *abrazo* is repeated with each individual when one leaves a small social gathering of friends or family. *Chao* (Bye) is a common parting phrase.

Chileans usually use titles when addressing people. *Señor* (Mr.), *Señora* (Mrs.), and *Señorita* (Miss) are common for strangers and acquaintances, as are professional titles, such as *Doctor/a*, *Director/a*, *Profesor/a*. When speaking with the elderly or other respected people, one uses *Don* and *Doña* with their first name to show special respect and familiarity. Chileans, more than other Latin Americans, address others with the formal *usted* (you) more often than with the familiar *tú*.

Gestures

Respect and courtesy are important to Chileans. Eye contact and correct posture are important during conversation. Yawns are suppressed or politely concealed with the hand. Items, including money, are handed, not tossed, to other people. Chileans point with puckered lips rather than with the index finger. An upturned palm with the index finger or all fingers motioning toward oneself (the gesture used in the United States for beckoning) is the gesture to pick a fight in Chile.

Visiting

Chileans generally consider people to be more important than schedules, and punctuality is not stressed. People may arrive 30 minutes late or even later to a dinner appointment or scheduled visit. Punctuality is more closely observed in the workplace.

Guests wait outside the door of a home until invited inside. Hosts usually offer something to eat or drink; refusing is offensive. Dinner guests may bring a gift of flowers, chocolates, good wine, or (in lower-income areas) bread for the host family. Guests invited to lunch might offer to bring a dessert, such as cookies or ice cream. Chileans appreciate guests who show genuine interest in their family, especially their children.

Eating

Chileans eat the main meal at midday and a lighter meal between 8 and 10 p.m. Afternoon teatime (*onces*) is customarily taken around 5 or 6 p.m. At teatime, beverages, small sandwiches, and cookies or cakes are served. Chileans converse freely at the table. The hostess is often complimented on the meal. People eat in the continental style, with the fork held in the left hand and the knife in the right. They keep both hands above the table at all times. It is impolite to leave directly after eating; instead, guests stay for conversation.

In a restaurant, a server can be summoned with a raised finger; meal checks are not brought to the table until requested. It is traditionally considered bad manners to eat food, except ice cream, while walking in public. However, as fast food increases in popularity, this habit is changing.

LIFESTYLE

Family

The family unit in Chile encompasses the extended family. While men have tended to dominate private and public life in the past, recent years have seen a change in attitudes about women in the home and in the professional world. Many women hold key political and business positions. And while in families where a father is present, he takes the lead, the mother has considerable influence on decisions. Reciprocity characterizes the relationship between the husband and wife. Both the man and the woman perform courtesies for each other. It is customary for a person to bear two family names; the last name is the mother's family name and the second-to-last name is the father's family name. Chileans either go by their full name or use their father's family name, which is the official surname. Therefore, a person named José Felipe Correa Péres, for example, could use his full name or be addressed as *Señor Correa*. As in other Latin American countries, married women retain their father's family name rather than use that of their husband's.

Housing

Extended families often live in separate houses located on the same lot. As children grow up they often build their own rooms by adding on to their parents' homes. Chile has an extensive public housing system (called SERVIU), which helps young people move into, and eventually own, their own homes. Sometimes the homes are very basic, in some cases consisting of nothing more than a front room, a kitchen, and a bathroom. Occupants must construct the rest of the home themselves, using cinderblock, wood, or cement. Most houses have fences around them. These offer privacy, security, and, at times, aesthetic appeal. Many of these fences were built in the Pinochet era, when, as part of a progress movement, people were provided with funds to build them. Some of these are attractive cement structures, which conceal a dilapidated house. Nearly all urban homes have access to electricity and drinking water, though poor families struggle to pay the bills and so sometimes have their utilities shut off. Rural homes

are usually made of adobe and topped with red clay roof tiles. Many of these homes have no access to water or electricity. Apartment living is common in the larger cities.

Dating and Marriage

Young people begin dating by the time they are 16. Group dating is emphasized early on. Men marry at about age 22 and women marry between ages 18 and 23. Couples often date from one to three years before getting engaged. Many consider it important to finish one's education before marrying. A civil wedding ceremony often is followed by a traditional Christian ceremony. Receptions include food, drinks, and dancing and commonly are held at the home of the bride or at a hotel, restaurant, or reception hall. Though divorce is not recognized by the Catholic Church, a 2004 law legalized it for the first time in Chile.

Life Cycle

Pregnancy and birth are always causes for celebration. Generous labor laws with respect to maternity leave attest to the importance placed on having and rearing children. Legally, Chileans are considered adults when they turn 18 and can start voting and driving. A person's death is marked by large gatherings of friends and family. A *velorio* (wake) generally takes place in the home of the deceased's family, where relatives keep watch over the body until burial. During that time, friends and acquaintances pass by to express their condolences. The burial must occur within 24 to 48 hours after death, and the crowd will often travel to the cemetery in procession. Sometimes they walk, and other times they go in cars or on buses. At the graveside, mourners make no attempt to suppress their emotions. It is common to recognize the anniversary of a death by returning to the gravesite of loved ones.

Diet

Many national dishes are prepared with fish, seafood, chicken, beef, beans, eggs, and corn. Different regions feature different foods and dishes, but some favorites include *empanadas de horno* (meat turnovers with beef, hard-boiled eggs, onions, olives, and raisins), *pastel de choclo* (a baked meal of beef, chicken, onions, corn, eggs, and spices), *cazuela de ave* (chicken soup), *ensalada chilena* (cold tomato-and-onion salad), and seafood casseroles and stews. On rainy days, children enjoy eating *sopaipillas*, which are made from a deep-fried pumpkin dough sprinkled with sugar. *Manjar*, made by boiling an unopened can of sweetened condensed milk for hours, is a favorite bread spread and baking ingredient. Beverages usually are served at room temperature. Chile is well known for its wines; *pisco* (grape brandy) is the national drink.

Recreation

Popular activities include sports, theater, and music. *Fútbol* (soccer) is the most popular sport, and basketball is gaining in popularity. Chileans also enjoy swimming, going to parks, and watching videos at home. During the summer, vacations to the coast or the countryside are common. Taking advantage of the country's long coastline, Chileans enjoy fishing and, in

some areas, surfing. Weekend or holiday barbecues are frequent social gatherings. Rodeos are popular in some areas. Cowboys (*huasos*) wear handwoven *ponchos* and straw hats. The main event consists of a pair of *huasos* skillfully guiding their horses to trap a steer against a padded arena wall. Points are earned for the portion of the steer that is pinned.

The Arts

Of its cultural arts, Chile is best known for poetry. Two poets received the Nobel Prize for literature, Gabriela Mistral (1945) and Pablo Neruda (1971). Isabel Allende and other contemporary Chilean authors are internationally known. European music and art are popular. Performing groups and museums enjoy patronage in larger cities. Traditional arts are a source of inspiration to contemporary artists and musicians. Textile and pottery designs of indigenous peoples are frequently integrated into modern designs. Chilean music and dance reflect both Spanish and native heritage. The *cueca*, a courtship dance, is the national dance. *Tonadas* (Chilean folk music) has been influential in political and social reform. European and native instruments, such as the accordion, guitar, *guitarrón* (a 25-string guitar), piano, harp, and *rabel* (similar to a fiddle), are used to create a unique sound.

Holidays

Chile's holidays include New Year's Day, Easter, Labor Day (1 May), Naval Battle of Iquique (21 May), Independence Day (18 Sept.), Armed Forces Day (19 Sept.), *Día de la Raza* or Day of the Race (12 Oct.), All Saints' Day (1 Nov.), and Christmas. People celebrate Independence Day at parks, where they eat *empanadas*, drink *chicha* (a sweet drink made with fermented grapes), and dance the *cueca* to guitar music. In many ways, Christmas is celebrated just like in North America, but some activities are different because Christmas takes place during summer in Chile. Families often hold outdoor barbecues the day before and open their gifts at midnight. Although Christmas is a family holiday, Chileans consider New Year's the most important time for family gatherings.

SOCIETY

Government

The Republic of Chile is a multiparty democracy. The country is divided into 15 numbered regions, of which Region I is the most northern. President Sebastián Piñera is currently chief of state and head of government. The National Congress has two houses: the Senate (38 members) and the Chamber of Deputies (120 members). Legislative politics revolve around two bloc coalitions: the center-right and the center-left. The legislature is located in the city of Valparaíso. The voting age is 18. All eligible citizens who have registered to vote are required by law to do so.

Economy

Chile's economy is one of the strongest in Latin America. The nation's foreign debt has decreased steadily, and the country enjoys considerable foreign investment. Chileans enjoy fairly

good access to the health care, education, and economic resources necessary for a decent standard of living; however, women's wages are substantially lower than men's. The country's innovative pension system has generated substantial savings, and general inflation has remained low. However, fluctuating copper prices, regional and global economic difficulties, and droughts have caused unemployment to rise. Economic growth continues but at a slower pace.

The government has instituted a program to help the poor by extending special small-business loans, investing in the poorest schools, and building permanent homes for low-income families. The income of the poorest Chileans has subsequently risen by 20 percent, and the percentage of the population living below the poverty line has fallen.

Chile is one of the world's largest producers of copper, which accounts for more than half of all export earnings. Fresh fruit has become another chief export. Agriculture, fish products, wood products, and mining are all important to the diverse economy. Chile has actively sought to expand its export market through international free-trade agreements. The currency is the Chilean *peso* (CLP).

Transportation and Communications

Public transportation in Chile is efficient, although many roads remain unpaved. Traffic in Santiago is heavy and can be hazardous. Smog and other pollution problems sometimes result in school and business closures as cars are restricted. The government is working to implement stricter emissions test requirements and reduce industrial pollution. Santiago has a subway, and elsewhere, private bus systems provide inexpensive travel in and between cities. Private cars are becoming more common. Trucks, motorcycles, and bicycles are used in rural areas to travel longer distances. Several airports serve domestic and international travelers. A satellite system, cable television, and other technological advances have helped Chile increase communications and improve radio and television service throughout the country. Internet use is on the rise in both urban and rural areas. The mail system is modern and efficient.

Education

Chile has one of the best-educated populations in Latin America; 95 percent of children finish primary school, with most going on to secondary school. Schooling is free and compulsory between ages five and seventeen. Parents may choose which school their child will attend. However, most parents send their children to the closest schools because they lack information about the schools and the cost of transportation is prohibitive.

Educational reforms that were implemented after the return to democracy have substantially increased government spending on education and turned over the operation of some state-sponsored schools to private companies. In addition to public schools, there are many private, commercial, and industrial educational institutions. Chileans value education, viewing it as the way to a better life. There are eight universities in Santiago alone; other universities and technical institutes are located throughout the country.

Health

Currently, health care is nationalized. However, the system is undergoing decentralization, and private insurance institutions are taking over a portion of care payment. Citizens have a choice as to whether they use the private or public healthcare system. Over the past few years, Chileans have enjoyed increasingly good health, and infant mortality rates have dropped substantially. Water is potable in most areas. Typhoid fever and air pollution, particularly in Santiago, remain public health threats.

AT A GLANCE

Contact Information

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POPULATION & AREA

Population	16,746,491 (rank=60)
Area, sq. mi.	291,933 (rank=39)
Area, sq. km.	756,102

DEVELOPMENT DATA

Human Dev. Index* rank	45 of 182 countries
Gender inequality rank	53 of 155 countries
Real GDP per capita	\$14,700
Adult literacy rate	96% (male); 96% (female)
Infant mortality rate	8 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy	74 (male); 81 (female)

*UN Development Programme, Human Development Report 2010 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).