

## **THE CHANGING FACES OF SANTIAGO – By Stephanie Jackson**

*Discovering the pleasures and the pain of the Chilean capital*

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Following several previous visits to Chile I slid into its sprawling capital, Santiago, with the familiar ease and comfort of a favoured pair of old jeans, worn and tattered yet unable to be discarded, still retaining some indefinable and reassuring appeal.

Santiago, with more than five million inhabitants, is noisy, chaotic, congested, and polluted, but inexplicably, I love it. It's a seductive, two-faced city, with its glare of modern elegance and affluence only lightly camouflaging the threadbare and old, a city of unexpected diversity, of rich and poor, of beauty and ugliness, of gleaming high-rise and decaying slums.

Its main artery, the horrifying ten-lane Alameda, (officially known as Avenida del Libertador General Bernardo O'Higgins) throbs continuously with the roar of traffic. But at 10am on some weekdays, the chaos temporarily subsides to allow the ceremonial changing of the guard at the Palacio de La Moneda, a grey 18th century building, which is the headquarters of the Chilean president.

I shivered as I silently watched the phalanx of grim-faced troops approach, and momentarily relived the fearful days of 1989 when those same troops, wielding batons and machine guns and firing tear gas, had pursued me and other innocents along the Alameda as the dictator Pinochet's rule drew to a violent close. There had been fear, distrust, and anger then, but now, with democracy re-established, peace and stability have returned.

I retreated from the Alameda, from the biting stench of diesel fumes and ear-battering traffic noise to the relative calm of the Ahumada mall which stabs through Santiago's commercial heart. There, elegant women strutted in luxurious furs, diners packed expensive cafes, and wealthy executives jostled politely for space in popular stand-up coffee bars. Beside a cafe's door a beggar extended a calloused, soiled hand in hope of some meagre reward. An old woman sat hunched in a dim corner, optimistically rattling her tin of coins. And a young man, deformed and pitifully immobile, squatted on the cold paving, his sad, dark eyes pleading for money to be placed in his tangled fingers.

I smudged the tears from my eyes, rummaged in my pocket for a few pesos, and hurried with the crowd into the nearby Plaza de Armas. In this central city park, established during the 16th century, musicians played, artists displayed their diverse talents, religious fanatics spouted their individual philosophies, and lovers openly caressed, for this is where Santiago presents its most endearing face that is lined with gentle, happy, and comforting features.

Some of Santiago's finest colonial era buildings border the plaza, including the ornate 19th century post office, and the imposing 18th century cathedral with its museum of religious art, colonial furniture, silverware, and rare manuscripts dating from the 16th century.

From the plaza another congested mall leads to the pleasurable mayhem of the central market, where waiters in faded red jackets and black bow ties persuasively enticed customers into crowded dining areas, each surrounded by the bustle of commerce, and filled with the aromas of fresh fish, flowers, fruit, and cheeses. And oblivious to the gentle sounds of traditional Andean music and the entertaining chatter of an itinerant carpet salesman, businessmen, mobile phones grafted to their ears, dined on lobster and wine

A brief trip on the metro, Santiago's popular underground railway network, returned me to the Alameda, where traffic noise intensified as workers and shoppers reinvaded the city after siesta, that mid-day break that is an essential component of the South American lifestyle. Risking life and limb, I darted across the road to Santa Lucia hill, the site of the city's foundation in 1545 and of savage battles against the regions indigenous Mapuche people.

It is, today, a large and beautiful park with ornate pools, fountains and endless stairways leading to high terraces and finally to the battlements of the ancient fortress created on its rocky summit. But dominating Santiago's skyline, rising high above its glistening concrete and glass skyscrapers, stands the hill of San Cristobal. Once a quarry from where stone was extracted for construction work during the colonial era, its modern development began in 1908 with the construction of a dazzling white 36-metre statue of the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception. And in a moment of uncharacteristic bravery - or insanity - I made a rapidly regretted decision to travel the two kilometres to the hill's 880-metre summit via the teleferico - a cable car that swayed wildly in ever huff and puff of breeze that fluttered across the landscape

Finally, safely back on terra very firma, though with uncontrollably wobbling knees, I climbed the last steps to San Cristobal's summit for the incomparable spectacle across the city to the near horizon crowned with the immense snow covered peaks of the Andes Mountains. Far below lay the city's sprawling maze of streets that conceal fascinating museums, art galleries, craft markets, and the grandeur of the 18th century mansion, Palacio Cousino with its exquisite decor of parquet, marble, gold, and velvet. Less imposing residences - homes of adobe, their concrete and plaster facades deteriorating to expose their rudimentary construction - line gated alleyways.

Beyond these, lie suburbs of shaded leafy avenues where birds twitter unseen in dense foliage and perfumed air wafts from floral gardens of opulent houses as housemaids briskly sweep fallen leaves from paths and driveways occupied by glossy BMWs and silver Mercedes.

And at the city's extremities lie the inevitable, unwelcoming slums. Rows of decaying apartment blocks sprout from weed-choked allotments, and scrawled graffiti in abandoned parks makes discontent conspicuously evident. "Education for the rich, misery for the poor", they shout at anyone brave, or foolish, enough to pass this way.

Eventually descending from San Cristobal via the less terrifying "funicular" - a cable railway erected in 1925 and that makes its slow and cautious descent down the 500-metre 45-degree face of the hill - I returned to the Ahumada.

Evening traders had begun to display their diverse wares, with bras, T-shirts, kitchen utensils, sweets, jewellery, and toys all neatly laid out across the ground. A religious group began their hypnotic chant; gamblers running an illegal game kept watch for the approach of police; and street theatre performers raised roars of laughter as the almost impenetrable crowd of pedestrians shuffled past.

Beyond the mall a horse and cart trotted calmly among the thinning night traffic. Two elderly ladies, their ragged clothing washed and hung to dry on a vacant bench, bundled up rejected paper and cardboard as closing shutters rattled down over window displays of Gucci shoes and designer dresses. And an old man, huddled on the church steps, pulled his worn blanket tightly around his frail body. I dined, attempting, unsuccessfully, to subdue feelings of guilt at my relevant affluence in the face of poverty.

At 10.30pm the earth began to move. The stone walls of my third floor hotel room shook; the glass lamp swung violently from the high ceiling; and a shrill scream sounded from an adjoining room as a deep rumble reverberated from the belly of the earth. Santiago had appeared to be sleeping but she was as two-faced as ever, awake when I least expected it. An earthquake that registered 5.6 proved Santiago to be as unpredictable as she has always been.