

POINT OF VIEW

From Santiago to Atacama. The magic of a frontier land

Like many other nice things that have happened to me, Chile came into my life by chance one afternoon at the end of a childhood summer.

Sonia Bernicchi

It was September 11th, 1973 and I was driving around Lucca with my father. We were listening to the radio when the music was interrupted by the news that La Moneda Palace in Santiago had been under siege for hours, air raids had begun and no one knew what had happened to President Salvador Allende.

I don't know what it was that struck my child's imagination. I was actually hearing about a country that I had studied in school, a country very far from my own, on another continent. In the 1970s non-globalized world, distances were very real.

It was at that moment that I adopted Chile. I started to read everything I could find about it, to study its customs and traditions, its history. In school, I always made sure that, for geography projects, I was given Chile to research. I got to know the Inti-Illimani and through their songs I began to learn Spanish; I discovered Pablo Neruda and Elena Serrano. I would never have imagined that one day I would really go there and would continue to go there often, for work and for passion.

Chile is a magical, many faceted country where the millenary culture of the native Indians thrives together with the most recent European immigrant culture. It is a country that is so close and at the same time distant from us.

IN CHILE THERE ARE MANY SIMILARITIES WITH AN EFFICIENT AND PROFESSIONAL EUROPEAN STYLE; a style that co-exists with exquisitely Latin American traits such as hospitality, the warmth of human relations and smiles.

Santiago is an elegant city with neighborhoods that are rich in history and culture and has several architectural styles. The city is the point of departure for all the buses connecting the capital to the rest of Chile. In South America humanity moves around on buses and I, too, left for the North of the country following the advice of my Chilean friend Zarko. Destination: the Atacama Desert, departure from the Estación Central. People coming, people going, buses divided into economic, semi cama and salon cama. Crossing the country is very different from on the ground from the impression one gets flying over it on an airplane.

THE LANDSCAPE IS CONTINUOUSLY CHANGING. From the sea to Mediterranean vegetation, the more steppe-like plant life, and then the desert. You feel like you are living a country, like you are traveling, not just moving, and that you are caressing the diversities.

I arrive in San Pedro after a twenty-hour bus ride. The road continues straight through the desert which in this part of the world is never the same. In one place, rocky and the color of tobacco, in another white and sandy, the chocolate colored volcano tops and then, as we approach San Pedro, a salted expansion. The sky is intensely blue, almost blinding, and then there are the ever-present Andes. Bolivian anthropologist Guillermo Francovich writes: "The Indio is the Andes and the Andes are the Indio; he is not just an offspring of the mountain, he identifies himself with her". San Pedro is the color of coffee, with white streets, Atacama-colored brick houses and the omnipresent church in front of the plaza, with the Purisima - the Virgin - at the center of the altar. The population is Atacameña (Aymar), natives who reached the Andean plateaux about 12,000 years ago and who today live on tourism, lama breeding and grain and potato farming. Their history lives on in Tulo, the most ancient archeological site in the entire Atacama Desert, and in the Gustavo La Paige Museum. The natives cohabit the city with Santiago's young generation who have opened alternative clubs here, meeting places for backpackers travelling around South America. But I prefer to have dinner always at the one existing inn here at the village doors, whose owner is Atacameña. The restaurant is frequen-

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ted only by the locals. Few dishes accompanied by mate de coca that is used to combat soroche (a strong headache caused by the high altitude) and to forget how rugged nature can be. I'm there every night and the owner welcomes me, smiling. Just a few words suffice to allow us an understanding of each other and on the last night of my stay in San Pedro she offers me some mate. I thank her for the kind hospitality. In her eyes is the proof that sometimes words are not necessary.

IN SAN PEDRO YOU REALLY GET THE FEELING YOU ARE IN A PLACE FAR AWAY FROM CIVILIZATION, IN A PLACE FAITHFUL TO ITSELF. There is nothing but there is everything. And above all, there is the silence and majesty of the desert. The town overlooks the Salar de Atacama. The desert is hard, the rocks are cutting, sharp, sculpted by the sun and the wind, the colors are lunar, violet. It has no similarity with the sinuosity of the Sahara desert. Traces of roads leading to remote mines and stones that tell the story of the struggles between the natives and the Spanish Conquistadores. You can walk for hours without meeting a living soul and the salar is a place that invites you to break from time, a place where to decompress, empty your soul, lose all reference points and reach nothingness¹.

FROM SAN PEDRO WE START OFF ON OUR ADVENTURE. First the Chaxa salt lagoon where the pink flamencos with their orange wings and black tails come to nest from Bolivia, the Miscanti and Miñiques lagoons, 4,000 meters above sea level. It is cold and the wind blows impetuously. It is difficult to walk at this altitude, but the shortness of breath is well worth this magnetic landscape: stretches of salt, rocks, bushes, volcanoes in the background, the sky so close you can touch it. And then the Salar del Talar on the border with Argentina (Paso de Lago Sico), Socaire, where for thousands of years dark-skinned natives with their faces carved by the harshness of the climate have been living on terrace farming. They are a proud people and say that "if you see a white man, he comes from Chile". And the puesta del sol, a greeting to the sun, antique ritual of the Valle de la Luna, a platform of salt crystals and tormented rocks, and Las Tres Marías where 25 Atacameños were killed fighting against the Spanish in 1540. But the desert unexpectedly offers small oases that are called Termas de Puritana, about 30 km from San Pedro. The canyons cache eight small natural pools with very hot volcanic waterfalls. Since nothing is easy in the desert and beauty must be conquered, it takes some effort to descend along the rocks on foot. As always, a reward awaits. We are 3,500 meters above sea level, not a living soul present. There are no shops, so you must have a supply of food and water with you. The sun is strong and blinding and the more I look around the more it seems impossible to me. An arid canyon caches its secret - water - that in turn has given birth to a splendid vegetation.

I ARRIVE AT THE BOLIVIAN BORDER ACCOMPANIED BY THE VOLCANO LICANCABUR AT 4,700 METERS. On the main road leading to the Jama Pass in Argentina there are dirt roads that seem to head in the direction of nothing. Chile is a frontier land and I pass that frontier. It has a taste of more ancient times. There is an open crossbar and a small empty police station. There is no one; the sound of the cold wind blowing and the ruggedness of the landscape are my only companions. Just a few kilometers beyond the border there is the enchanting Laguna Verde. The main road is a straight line and when trucks pass by headed for Bolivia, Paraguay or Argentina they honk their horns to say hello, happy to finally have met someone.

Along the road, you can find small mausoleums called Animitas that bear witness to accidents. Inside there are photographs, scraps from car wreckages, glass or personal objects that belonged to the deceased. I try to imagine these persons when they were alive. In this place of nothingness, it is difficult to believe that there are so many accidents. The desert has the tendency to cancel traces of humanity and the Animitas bear witness to those who are no longer in this world but who have passed through here.

AND THE DESERT NEVER SLEEPS. If you want to see the Geyser del Tatio, you have to start off at night. At four am, San Pedro is already awake and bustling. Small vans and pick-ups leaving for the Valley of El Tatio. The road is bumpy, full of fords and the jeep seems suspended in the air while hurtling towards nothingness. There is a minibus in front of me that involuntarily acts as a forerunner, but the drivers do not like to be followed. They know the way and they also know that self-made-tourists do not. The game of cat and mouse continues all the way. I arrive in El Tatio after a little more than two hours' travel. The dawn highlights the rising mist due to the difference in temperature. A thin, lunar expanse, among volcanoes and a myriad of geysers. The dirt road is full of perils and enters into canyons caching villages that clutch onto the walls of deep gorges.

By chance, I find myself in Caspana, a small village situated in a valley that is not easy to reach, where the 450 inhabitants live on sheep-breeding and farming. I walk along on tiptoe in order not to disturb the slow pace and quietness of this place. Here, time seems to have stopped. The brick houses with thatched roofs, the village church, the natives with their typical Bolivian bowler hats that serve as support to transport bundles of wood. Infants inside a baby carrier made of strips of cloth. I watch them as they pass by but do not take pictures because

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se I know they do not like it. The vicunas with colored bows on their ears look at me impassively. The desert world embodies the extremes in an almost perfect harmony of opposites. History mixes with legend and with tales of adventurous travels. Train tracks losing themselves into nothingness remind me of the Longitudinal Norte, the most solitary train in the world that crosses the Chilean desert in four days. It would be beautiful to make this trip in the company of the characters in Rivera Letelier Hernan's book, getting on and off the train during its surreal journey: a fortune-teller accompanied by her aromatic herbs and talismans, a blind storyteller, two "busy-body" sisters, two lovers sinking into an endless kiss...

"THE DUSTY CARRIAGES RATTLE OUT A HARSH, INTERMINABLE LITANY, BEGGING THAT THE HEAT WILL NOT DISCOURAGE THE LOCOMOTIVE, that the azure mirages into which the far-off steel tracks drown do not deceive her with their illusory lagoon and that she -- dead with thirst -- does not halt like a crushed animal in the middle of these infinite, desolate expansions. The telegraph poles, running intermittently backwards, symmetrically cut the landscape and memories in two."2 But this lunar desert also affords a delicate side, as stated by Luis Sepulveda in his "Historias Marginales". "Every year on March 31st, it rains for a half hour, and this drizzle is sufficient to make the desert bloom, to paint it red with millions of small Atacama roses, tiny flowers that last only a few hours before being cindered by the sun". The desert of Atacama is so mysterious that I do not feel nostalgia, sadness or anguish at its infiniteness. Instead, it makes me think of how easy it is to disappear into nothingness and cross this piece of world immersed in silence, a mosaic of colors, of volcanoes, cactuses, of crystals and a harshness that may be a metaphor of life that makes us come to terms with the most authentic part of ourselves but also with the more melancholic one.

THE WORLD OF BUSINESS. CHILE: SO CLOSE AND YET SO FAR. I began working in Chile in the mid-1990s. An important order catapulted me to the other side of the world. Happy to find myself in a country that I had loved since my infancy, almost incredulous at finding myself in front of La Moneda Palace, intrigued by the city of Santiago, with the help of my Castilian Spanish I immediately found myself at home in the longest country in the world. It is still today a joy for me to be able to go to Chile and it no longer seems so far away. This may also be due to the warm human relations, rapports of friendship and respect established in the course of time with our collaborators and customers.

THE CHILEAN STYLE IS CERTAINLY MORE EUROPEAN WITH RESPECT TO THE REST OF SOUTH AMERICA. This is due to the predominance of Europeans who immigrated to Chile, however, the South American aspect also certainly stand out. Chileans are very warm and affable people. The most common greeting is the "abrazo" and a kiss on the cheek. It is a pleasure for me to meet customers again. And Chileans, like we Italians, love contact and looking directly and intensely into the eyes of their interlocutor and speaking from a very close distance -- differently from Americans and Northern Europeans who frown on physical contact and maintain a distance of at least 70 centimeters from their interlocutor.

I will never forget my visit to an important facility of one of my customers, where I was greeted by the Italian flag waving at the entrance to the office building and a wonderfully warm welcome message. Small but great details that give the idea that a working relationship is not made only of purely business aspects but is also based on mutual respect, professionalism and trust.

SPEAKING SPANISH UNDOUBTEDLY HELPS. It is not only an advantage from a professional point of view: speaking the same language creates empathy and opens joint horizons. However, be careful with the use of some terms that in South America can have a different meaning. For example, in this part of the world, the verb to take must be translated with tomar and agarrar but never with coger, a word that has a sexual connotation. An important thing to remember in Chile, like in most of South America, is that human relations are the key to success. Chileans look for relationships, not business agreements. They prefer to deal with people, not with an impersonal structure. Before embarking on any negotiation, we speak about ourselves, our families, what has taken place since we last met, and the traits that distinguish negotiations are informality and cordiality.

Despite the fact that I have often heard that Chile is a country with a rather chauvinist attitude, personally I have never had any problems. I have found myself the only woman at technical meetings or lunches; at facilities with dozens of male engineers, production and sales directors, and never has my professional competence been questioned.

NEGOTIATIONS ARE ALWAYS MARKED BY RESPECT, DIALOGUE AND GUIDED BY TRUE PROFESSIONALISM. It is important to visit customers. Chileans will always make you feel welcomed and soon a very likeable bond will be established - fundamental in South America - that strengthens professional rapports, too. It is better not to schedule visits in the months of January and February because in this part of the world they correspond to our months of July and August, hence vacation time. Like my friend Zarko says, in Chile December 31st really is the end of the year. Schools close for summer break and people leave for vacation.

LIKE IN EVERY SOUTH OF THE WORLD, THE LAW OF NON-AGGRESSION DURING NEGOTIATIONS HOLDS TRUE. Chileans are direct and very professional in their approach but being too aggressive and pushing for a fast conclusion of the deal leads to no good. Flexibility and compromise are important to prove that the value of the relationship is more important than the mere commercial aspects of the negotiation. Diplomacy and patience are essential. Chileans do not like to say "no" and the counterpart must never try to force a "no". You need time to build solid business relationships and should never try to relate mistakes, problems and other issues through direct discussions because in Chile this approach does not work.

Chile is a wonderful country and Chileans are open, hospitable and sociable people. A human, cultural and business exchange is interesting and is a source of personal enrichment. If we relate to this country with curiosity and openness and a willingness to learn, we return home with the feeling that we have learned something new and that we can do business in a different way - a certainly more humane and satisfying way. •

1. Marcela Serrano – Ten Women, published in Italy by Feltrinelli, August 2011. (English courtesy translation).

2. RIVERA LETELIER HERNAN – TRAINS GO TO PURGATORY, PUBLISHED IN ITALY BY GUANDA 2001. (ENGLISH COURTESY TRANSLATION).