

Ten Tips for Older Travellers in Chile



We've labelled this as "tips for older travellers" because we've tried to comment on a few things that we know some travellers of our age are put off by when it comes to organising your own trips, such as transport (ie isn't it easier if someone organises this for you?) and food and water (ie won't I get sick?).

But many of the tips will be just as useful for younger travellers. In that sense the tips apply to anyone not familiar with travelling in Chile and some also apply to other countries in the region.

In general Chile is probably the safest and easiest country to travel in South America. It's transport systems are well organised. It is also reasonably well geared up for tourists.

Here are a few things we found useful when travelling in Chile.

Ten Tips

1. Catch Public Transport in Santiago

If Chile is your entry point to South America or your sole destination chances are you'll start your trip in Santiago. The city has a very good metro and bus system so using public transport is a good option. You'll need a reloadable BIP card to access it. These can be purchased at metro stations and in some shops. Just look for the BIP signs. You can reload the cards at staffed windows in the metro stations or through vending machines in the stations. This works out a lot cheaper than taxis or tourist specific buses.

2. Check your Taxi Price before you take off

Most of the black and yellow taxis have meters, though some drivers don't always use them. A good rule of thumb is to ask the driver for a price before you start the journey. Many will indicate that they have a meter and this will be used and you'll pay a fair price. Others will give you a quote and you can decide for yourself if it seems reasonable. If possible ask your hotel staff what the cost should be for a trip before you start. It's also a good idea to have lots of small 1000 and 2000 peso notes so you can pay in the right money. Some drivers either won't have change or will claim not to. So, with taxis, be prepared.

3. Use the Long Distance Buses

Chile's long distance buses are generally comfortable, reasonably priced, have toilets and are on time. They are big, modern coaches, some even have wifi on board (particularly on the Santiago to Valparaiso run) and organise meal pick ups on route (ie you choose from a menu and the bus stops to pick up the food a little later on).

4. Learn Some Spanish

While you certainly don't need to be fluent in Spanish, it does make life easier if you have a few basics. Tips 1,2 and 3 above all require communication with another person. Most metro staff/taxi drivers/bus booking personnel won't speak English, so to make the most of those tips you need a few things:

- Numbers. If you're told it will cost "ocho mil pesos" for the cab ride while the taxi is blocking the traffic, you need to know what the quoted price is. In less stressed situations you can ask them to write it down.
- Times and days of the week – critical for getting the bus ticket on the day you want.
- A couple of key phrases such as: "I want to go to.....", "At what time....", "Do you have....", "I would like....", and the conversation opener 'habla usted ingles?' (do you speak English?) - this is the polite way to ask it and people appreciate that you don't assume that they should be able to

Speak English. After all, you're the visitor to their country.

5. Toilet Tips

Yes, when the notice says, "Don't throw paper in the toilet, use the basket", they mean it – no paper, nada! The plumbing systems are not geared up for paper so use the baskets as instructed.

Most Chilean public toilets cost to use, so have your coins ready that you get as change. We saw prices range from \$150 pesos to \$500 at Refugio Chileno in Torres del Paine National Park (that's \$Aus1 for a tinkle!).

It's also a good idea to carry your own toilet paper with you. You won't necessarily be provided with any, even if you've paid for the privilege of using the facility.

6. Take Sensible Safety Precautions

Chile is generally a safe country to travel in, with plenty of tourists. It's easy to assume that you don't need to worry about such things as robberies.

However, like most countries at present, Chile is experiencing an economic downturn and a lot of people are doing it tough.

We were reminded of this when on one of the public ascensors (street lifts) in Valparaíso. The ascensor was one of the less central ones, and apparently, taking us to a part of town less visited by tourists. I was taking photos and a local man spoke to me just before we reached the top to indicate that I should not walk the street with the camera exposed, that it would be a dangerous thing to do. We took his advice. It was a salutatory reminder to not assume that all is safe.

So be aware, and don't flash the bling.

7. Do a bit of Self Catering

Supermarkets are well stocked in Santiago and the other major cities. You can save yourself a lot of money by doing a bit of self catering. Restaurants, particularly those catering for tourists, are similar, or a bit cheaper, than Australia, so this can add up if you're eating out every night. When doing your accommodation bookings consider apartments with a kitchen. We stayed in one for a week in Santiago. It was no more expensive than any mid-range hotel and we could prepare all our own meals (and it had a rooftop pool).

8. Rent a Car

Chile has a vast array of fabulous national parks, but many can be difficult to access by public transport. While tours are an option in some places, these are usually expensive compared to hiring a car and doing it yourself.

We found that hiring cars was simple and it was cheaper to do it at the time rather than pre-book through one of the international car booking sites. We also saw quite a few people travelling in camper vans of various sizes, so that's another option.

9. Drink the Wine.

Chilean wine is great. Supermarkets often have a wide range. A particular favourite of ours is carmenere, which is a red grape variety (a bit like a shiraz) that's only found in Chile. And the supermarket prices are cheap. You don't need to spend a fortune to get a good wine.

10. You can Drink the Water - Sometimes

Bottled water is readily available so you can visit Chile and not drink the tap water. But if you're coming for any length of time you can save a bit of money by drinking the water. Always check with your hotel what they recommend. In places like Patagonia the water is clean and generally drinkable.

In some places there is a high mineral content that is not good for people with kidney problems.

We also use water purification tablets in situations that seem reasonably safe, but we want to be extra sure.

So, as we said, check with your hotel or other local contact first.

