The Washington Post
Democracy Dies in Darkness

Traveling in Chile is a lesson in the ravages of climate change

By Shivya Nath
July 15, 2022 at 8:00 a.m. EDT

In Chile, the weather is predictably unpredictable. One minute, the sun shines brilliantly on the glacial blue lakes, allowing for the perfect Instagram shot. The next, the winds howl menacingly across the granite peaks, numbing your fingers. Then the rain lashes the stark terrain, and just as you're cursing the weather, double rainbows grace the sky!

That's a standing joke I heard frequently in Chile. Sandwiched between the Andes and the Pacific Ocean, this long, narrow, wildly beautiful country in South America lived up to its promise and allowed me to experience a diversity of seasons and landscapes over the short span of two months.

But as I hiked and snorkeled on the remote Juan Fernández archipelago (about 400 miles off Chile's Pacific Coast) and went waterfall chasing and glacier hopping in otherworldly Patagonia, I learned that, even for Chile, the weather is becoming increasingly unpredictable, leaving the country vulnerable to prolonged wildfires, the loss of endemic species and permanent damage to local ecosystems. Chile's glaciers are melting at a record pace; its old-growth forests are threatened by hotter, drier summers; and even species brought back from the brink of extinction face an uncertain future. Traveling through Chile gives visitors a real-time lesson on how climate change is changing the places we love.

Contrary to popular belief, Chile isn't so named because its shape resembles a chile pepper. One theory is that the word Chile is derived from the language of the Indigenous Aymara people, in which "chili" refers to the place where the land ends. Experiencing its profound beauty — intertwined with the reality of climate change — indeed made me feel as if I was at the end of the world, geographically and metaphorically. I could almost sense the future of our planet hovering uneasily on the horizon.

Here are some of the places in Chile that delivered a powerful lesson in the importance of sustainability.

Torres del Paine National Park

The breathtaking mountain scenery, shockingly blue lakes, expansive glaciers and “blue towers” (the grayish-blue granite peaks from which Torres del Paine National Park derives its name) of Chilean Patagonia have long been the stuff of bucket lists — and deservingly so. But as I hiked across one of the world’s most spectacular biosphere reserves with a guide from Patagonia Camp, I was surprised to witness acre after acre of burned native forest, started by an act of irresponsible travel and accelerated by the hotter, drier, thunderstorm-prone summers that have become common in Patagonia in the past 50 years.

In 2011, a traveler went wild camping at an unauthorized site on the shores of Grey Lake in the national park, sans a guide or permission from park authorities. While trying to burn some toilet paper, he ended up starting a fire in the dry, windy terrain that Patagonia is known for. The strong winds allowed the fire to spread rapidly, and the inaccessible mountain terrain made firefighting efforts nearly impossible.

The fire raged for 58 days and burned about 42,000 acres of old-growth, slow-growing, native Lenga forest. Some of these trees can grow to be more than 200 years old. The fire roasted thousands of animals to death, baked fertile soil and damaged swaths of wildlife habitat. With the park closed for several weeks and travelers evacuated, the fire cost tourism businesses an estimated $2 million.

Eleven years later, the scorched, ashy stretches of Lenga forest, devoid of life, are a reminder that our travel choices matter, sometimes more than we can fathom. Climate models predict Chile will only become drier and warmer, leaving its forests and wildlife even more vulnerable to human negligence.

Queulat National Park

A compelling conversation with my hostesses at Refugio Macales in Villa Mañihuales led me to Queulat National Park in the Aysén region of Patagonia, where I hiked and took a boat to witness the spectacular “hanging” Queulat Glacier (Ventisquero Colgante). The glacier straddles the ridge between two mountains, creating a gushing waterfall with a sheer drop into the lagoon below.

In the language of the nomadic Chono people, who once canoed and lived off this land, queulat means “the sound of falling water” — and queulat indeed followed me everywhere across the national park. But speaking to a park ranger, I learned that this deeply soothing sound might be quieted in a not-so-distant future.

Since it was first measured by a Chilean explorer in 1875, the Queulat Glacier has receded by about five miles, following the trajectory of other Patagonian glaciers which are receding at some of the fastest rates on the planet as a consequence of global warming. This spells a perilous future not just for the glacial water-reliant Patagonian towns and the nature-based tourism their economy relies on — but also local and global ecosystems.

To put timelines in perspective, human activity has taken just a few decades to destroy what began forming some 2.6 million years ago during the last Ice Age.

Robinson Crusoe Island

As part of a remote work initiative by Island Conservation and Lenovo, I spent five weeks living with the local community on the stunning Robinson Crusoe Island, part of the Juan Fernández archipelago. While there, I had the rare opportunity to join the conservation-focused dive shop Marenostrum Expediciones to snorkel with the Juan Fernández fur seals, which are endemic to the archipelago. Some of the most graceful swimmers in the ocean, they hung upside down in the water and playfully investigated my presence. Despite being the second smallest of fur seals, they have an impressive ability to undertake long foraging trips in the Pacific Ocean, lasting about 12 days on average.

Because of extensive hunting for their sealskin, these seals had been declared extinct in the early 20th century. However, in 1965, a Chilean scientist found about 200 seal pups in a cave off Alejandro Selkirk Island (also part of the archipelago) — prompting a strong sentiment of conservation among the islanders and compelling the Chilean government to declare their hunting illegal for the following 60 years. (This protection status is set to expire soon, but islanders are hopeful of its renewal.)

According to the last census by the Chilean National Forestry Corp., their population grew more than 800 percent between 1999 and 2018, to 84,827 individuals — drawing marine wildlife enthusiasts to the archipelago for a chance to swim at a responsible distance with them, strengthening the link between conservation and tourism-driven livelihoods. Though classified to be of least concern on the International Union for Conservation of Nature Red List, the seals remain vulnerable to entanglement in fishing nets and plastic debris, overfishing, mercury poisoning and oil spills. With climate change, the warming waters and altering marine ecosystem of the Pacific Ocean will probably affect their ability to do long-distance foraging, too.

As I traveled in Chile, the beauty I was lucky enough to experience was always layered with concern about a climate-ravaged future, prompting me to do more to advocate climate action and sustainable tourism. If travel is the best teacher, Chile is indeed the classroom we need.

Nath is a digital nomad. Find her on Twitter and Instagram: @shivya.