

Where a Year Ends and the Road Continues

After an unexpected and friendly dinner in the company of the Polish overlanders at Los Vilos, we left towards Valparaíso to celebrate the end of 2025, a year that gave us more than we could have planned for.

New Year's has never been just a date for us – it has always been a special date to rethink about the year we leave behind and plan for the new one to come. In 2024, we had embraced a Colombian tradition that guarantees travel in the year ahead: running around the block at midnight with an empty suitcase – if you are skeptical, we have proven that a little jog at midnight works – we left Florida mid-September of 2025 and by December 31, 2025, we had traveled over 7,000 miles to Los Vilos!



After leaving Los Vilos, the change came quickly. The arid hills decorated with cacti began to soften, and within a short drive, the landscape transformed – the mountains went from barren and red, to lush and green. Low clouds rolled in and it felt strangely familiar, as if we had been transported back to the Pacific Northwest, a place we once called home. By the time we arrived in Valparaíso, the city built on hills was wrapped in clouds. It again reminded us of Seattle, the city we once loved. Rather than focusing on the past and the life we once had, we decided to embrace the present recognizing we are fortunate to be able to have this adventure.

At that point, it was not just about the present it was also about the future, the new year! We had decided to embrace Chilean New Year traditions: lentils for good luck, and money tucked into our shoes for prosperity. Thus, our number one mission and priority when we arrived at the colorful city of Valparaíso was to look for a healthy lentil snack.



You may be asking yourself, why Valparaíso? We had been told more than once to stay in Viña del Mar instead. People described it as cleaner, calmer, and just better. But the more we researched, the clearer it became that Valparaíso was our NYE spot. It is said that Valparaíso “is the place to be for New Year’s Eve” not only in Chile, but in all South America. We were also drawn to Valparaíso because of the novels of Isabel Allende, and we were not looking for resorts, we were in search of character, and the city’s history.



Valparaíso was once one of the most important port cities on the Pacific, it thrived before the Panama Canal rerouted global trade. Ships from around the world once filled its harbor, bringing people, languages, ideas, and cultures that layered themselves into the city... more on the city later.

Back to NYE: after our lentils for good luck, we returned to the hotel to get ready for what we thought would be a long, lively night. At around 7:00pm we headed out in search of dinner. To our surprise, the streets were quiet, almost empty. For a moment, we wondered if we had misunderstood everything we'd heard about Valparaíso being *the place* to be for New Year's Eve. We climbed the winding stairs up Cerro Bella Vista and settled into an empty small restaurant for a simple, satisfying meal.

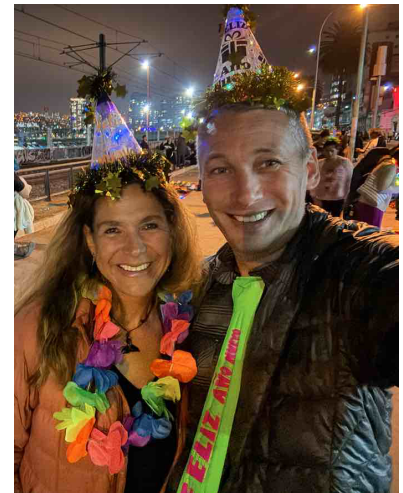


Mafe chose a safe local salad, while adventurous Scott went all in with piure, a Chilean delicacy harvested from the sea. Often called “edible sea squirt,” piure has a deep, iodine flavor, with an aroma that announces salt and cold rock, while its flavors linger like a wave that refuses to retreat. Scott would describe it as a mix of clams seasoned with deep week-old seaweed, accompanied by the aroma of low tide, with a special texture of something that you would only find in a fine tissue. Truly, it's not even an acquired taste, but an encounter! Scott failed in transforming his already eclectic palate and pivoted towards ordering French fries to ensure that his tastebuds would end the year not only with a familiar taste but a pleasant memory. Truth be told, the champagne erased the remnants of such Chilean delicacy.

We finished dinner and made our way back down the stairs toward the waterfront, heading in the direction of Plaza Sotomayor. Suddenly, with every step, which included a 1000 Chilean pesos bill, the city began to change. The quiet streets we had walked earlier gave way to clusters of people setting up along corners and sidewalks, unfolding chairs, sharing drinks, and playing music.

Although each group of friends and family had its own music, the various notes, floated through the air gently, overlapping without competing, as if everyone had agreed on an unspoken rhythm. That was when it clicked: we were exactly where we were supposed to be!

Right at midnight, fireworks launched across the bay, illuminating the entire coastline. After approximately 20 minutes, we walked to Plaza Sotomayor to watch the live band and dance. The city, and us, stayed awake all night. It was the perfect way to welcome 2026.



The next morning, we decided to explore Valparaíso. It climbs upward from the ocean, spreading across steep hills. Houses stack upon houses, painted in bold bright colors, nothing subtle, nothing uniform, nothing boring. Getting around Valparaíso is an experience in itself. The city's stairways twist and turn through the hills, each one with its own personality. Some are painted in bright colors, others are transformed into art, like the piano stairs, others have poems written on them. In essence, each stairway has a unique story to tell, you just have to listen through your eyes, and sometimes, your imagination.

Everything about Valparaíso feels layered, historical and raw, worn and expressive. A city that doesn't try to impress yet leaves an impression anyway, and somewhat of a disappointing one. To truly appreciate it, you must look past the dirt, the decay, and the layers of graffiti. Not the kind meant as art, but political slogans and markings that often swallow the beautiful architecture beneath them. The buildings themselves are striking, full of character and history, but they demand effort to see. The colors are undeniably beautiful, and walking through the narrow streets lined with balconies feels special, but

it is easy to get distracted as the city smells of urine, and neglect. Valparaíso is, in many ways, a decaying city, and that makes it hard to accept. If you are able to see through all of it, you can only imagine what it must have been like when it was clean, cared for, and alive with pride. Some say that in the mid-1990s, those with money left the city, and the poor and vagrant moved in, changing its trajectory. It feels especially tragic when Valparaíso was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2003. A city with so much history and such obvious beauty deserves better than slow erosion. What made it feel personal for us, is that we once lived in such a city and saw its decay...



Please don't misunderstand, we enjoyed Valparaíso and have great memories of a very memorable, and for at least one of us, tasty 2025 NYE!

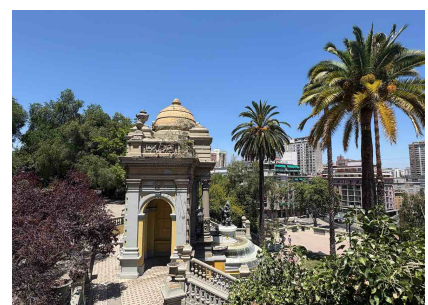
After Valparaíso, we made our way to Santiago, Chile's capital. Santiago felt like one of the most organized, clean, and modern capitals we have visited in South America so far. A city that truly breathes pride. It is remarkably green, filled with gardens, sidewalk cafes, and public spaces that invite people outside. There is a youthful energy to the city. Santiago is the kind of city you could easily imagine yourself living in. It feels comfortable, efficient, and balanced, a place where daily life seems to work, absent of the bit city chaos we have experienced so far in other places. At the same time, as travelers, we found that while it offers beautiful viewpoints, green spaces, and a vibrant cultural scene, it isn't a city packed with must-see attractions in the way some cities are. Its beauty also comes from the city being surrounded by mountains. It is for that reason that it's often called la ciudad de los cerros – the city of the hills or the peaks.



Cerro San Cristóbal rises above the city like a guardian, crowned by its iconic statue of the Immaculate Virgin and offering sweeping views of Santiago. To truly appreciate it, we went up to the top via funicular, and then descended via teleférico, an aerial cable car – imagine ascending a hill through tunnels of trees, leaving the city behind, slowly but surely, and then gliding down as the city starts to reappear with sweeping views of its life below. ch

While at the summit, you can find local vendors selling crafts, a variety of flavors of ice cream, fresh natural fruit juices, cold soda drinks and “mote de huesillo.” We thought it was odd for so many small stands to be selling cold refreshments AND a thick cheese Caribbean soup, with small bones – “mote” in Colombia is a cheese soup and huesillo means small bone in Spanish. Moreover, why would you want to have such a thing on a hot summer day? But we figured we might as well try it. We asked at a stand what “mote de huesillo” was and the lady told us it was a very cold and refreshing drink, so we ordered one to try! Mote de huesillo was in fact the perfect refreshing drink – it is made from sweet nectar of dried peaches (huesillo) cooked in sugar and cinnamon, mixed with cooked husked wheat berries (mote) served over ice. It was DELIC!

We enjoyed another delicious fruit juice at Cerro Santa Lucía, where we had “jugo de frutilla” but really, not just a “small fruit” juice, as we would understand it in regular Spanish, but strawberry juice. Regardless, Cerro Santa Lucía feels more garden-like – lush and green. It truly is a colorful historic hill woven with staircases, the fountain of Neptune, and all of this just right in the heart of downtown.



Aside from the two well-known and visited cerros, you also see towering in the distance, the often snowcapped and quietly watching over it all, Cerro El Plomo. All and all Santiago is a place that shows nature and urban life can, in fact, cohabitate.

Santiago was also the perfect place to pause and prepare, making sure Taco Libre is ready for what lays ahead on the Carretera Austral – a desolate and adventurous journey. On our last night in Santiago, we said goodbye to the big city feel in a wine bar listening to a live jazz band and sipping craft cocktails closing this chapter before embarking onto the next adventure.

January 12, 2026

