

Dear AFS Australia

I came here with many unanswered questions, but not really any specific expectations. But I can assure you that I never expected to fall in love with a country so much that it has become as much my 'home' as Australia. I am way over half way and have started to wish that time will slow down. But why do I love it here? I get asked that so much and I can explain it in two words; the people.

The first time I met my family I walked off the bus and I just got swamped with hugs and kisses. My biggest worry was gone in that second, my Chile house was to become a home. Then came my first day of school, and with my sisters support, I was introduced to people that from the very first second went out of their way to make me feel welcome. I now have friendships that I cherish with all my heart. Next, I was to be introduced to the Curico community. And on the street, and in the shops and restaurants I found people sincerely interested in learning if I liked their country and how it is different from my own. But most of all it is the little things that all these people do that makes me wake up with a smile; My Mum buying me a present of warm socks and pj's, not to mention installing another fire in the house, because I was always so cold. The history teacher including a special unit on Australian history just because I happened to show up in his class. My friends' unwavering patience when it comes to my Spanish and the countless terminology lists they made, with pictures. Or my sister telling me that she now had 4 sisters, not just 3.

But the week that captured the true spirit of Chile and its distinct culture was the week surrounding September 18th. For Australia Day we have one night of fireworks, in Chile it is one week of partying and eating and the whole of Chile becomes a sea of flags because every house has one hanging at the front. On the Friday before the week long school holidays my school dedicated the morning to patriotic celebrations. Each class had to learn a typical Chilean dance and then perform it on the Friday morning. I was so nervous because my friends were kindly pointing out that everyone would be looking at me because I was the 'foreigner' dancing a Chilean dance. But everything went smoothly, didn't fall on my face, and later that morning my school was transformed into a market, only selling typical Chilean food. So naturally I had to try as much as I could, and I can tell you that it was very good. The following week I went with my family to Santiago and we pretty much just ate and danced for 3 days. You have got to love that!

Another event in Chile that is extended over a week rather than a single day, as in Australia, is the School Anniversary. The whole school is divided into 2 teams and there are competitions and games for a week, or in other words, 'no work!' I played in tug a war, a game where you throw an egg between 2 people and the distance between them gets bigger and bigger and musical chairs. Amazingly my partner and I won the egg game even though I didn't have my glasses on so

towards the end I could not see the egg until it was really close. Also during the anniversary week the most amazing thing happened...history in the making...it snowed in Curico! It NEVER snows in Curico, not for the past 100 years. At school everyone was so excited and we had snow ball fights and everything! In the afternoon my family and I went to the mountains and made a snowman. With the anniversary week there was also a costume party in the night, which was fun! And guess what, at the end of the week.... My team won!!! Go red!!!

In August I went to London for a couple of weeks because I needed to do a test for University next year. It was my first time in Europe and I had such an amazing time. I saw the changing of the guards at Buckingham Palace, took photos of Big Ben and walked across Tower Bridge. It was just like visiting one huge monopoly board! But I did miss Chile so much. I missed the warmth of the people. I'm not saying that people in London were rude or mean but just a lot less 'Chileano.' There was silence on the subway, shaking hands instead of kissing and no constant questions about my life from strangers. But one thing I have learnt while doing the exchange is that you can't compare one country to another because they are just so different. So I've decided to love them both=)

The day after I got back from London was my French Dad's Bday party. We went to this cool restaurant that had a huge stage and dance floor. First there were typical Chilean dancing and then later professional dancers were all dancing on stage and everyone was copying them. It sounds so dumb but there were just so many people and you could look like a total idiot and nobody cared. We all danced till 5 in the morning. My French Dad, Jill, by the way, doesn't live in Chile because of work but he comes here a couple times a year for a couple of months. This time he was here for 1 and half months and it was the first time I met him. He is very different from my Mum. She is very relaxed and a 'go with the flow person.' Jill is the opposite, he loves structure. He actually made me realize that I have changed a lot. When I first got here I craved for that type of structure and the idea of knowing what I was doing that very afternoon, and maybe even the next day. I was never a 'Broome Time' person, don't think I ever will be, but I have changed. I don't think I'm less organized but I have definitely developed a more laid back attitude. And if you knew how stressed out I can get over certain things you would know that this is definitely a good thing! Besides organization Jill is an extremely good French Chef. Although once he served raw mince with a raw egg on top and I nearly vomited, he also tricked me into eating chicken liver.

The saddest thing that has happened to me in Chile so far was my sister leaving for France and a French brother coming to the house. Seeing Javi off at the airport was horrible and I balled my eyes out, I think the most out of the whole family. Javi was my best friend so the house is just not the same! Then Javi's replacement is my French brother, who plays the annoying younger brother role so very well. There is also now a distinct change of the shows on the television

from soap operas to football. My all female house has changed forever, but it doesn't make me love it any less.

Well I better get back to the hustle and bustle, but I have one more thing to say: You know artichokes?? Well in Chile I have been eating this vegetable looking thing for the whole time and I just assumed it wasn't in Australia. Then yesterday researched it on the internet and it was an artichoke!! This year has been full of surprises haha.

Love,
Sian Gower