Monday, July 13, 2015

LIVE·LIFE·LOVE

The verdant, inviting, eminently livable Chiloe Island off Chile

The artists' market, Feria Artesanal, in Dalcahue, on Chiloe Island, where hand-knit woolen shawls and wood carvings are for sale. (Steve Haggerty / ColorWorld)

Anne Z. Cooke, *TRIBUNE NEWS SERVICE*

POSTED: Sunday, March 15, 2015, 3:01 AM

CASTRO, Chile - The farm woman selling the orange and pink hand-knit dolls at the farm market in Castro, on Chiloe Island, is telling me where she gets the wool, I'm trying to answer, and we've hit a dead end. We're both speaking Spanish. After all, Chiloe belongs to Chile. But we might as well be shouting in the wind.

"She says the wool comes from her sheep, and she spins it herself," says Rodrigo Guridi, appearing at my elbow. A guide

Monday, July 13, 2015

News | Sports | Ent

SEX AND DATING CELEBRATIONS & ANNOUNCEME

GALLERY: The verdant, inviting, eminently livable Chiloe Island off Chile

Monday, July 13, 2015

and longtime resident of Chiloe Island, the largest island of the Chiloe Archipelago, Guridi had already unraveled a couple of mysteries for me and my husband, Steve, explaining that Chiloe's unique culture - people, language, farming, and fishing - is the result of more than three hundred years of isolation.

"You'll have to stay longer if you want to pick up the accent," he tells me, with a hint of I-told-you-so. We need at least two weeks to see what makes Chiloe (*CHEE-low-way*) a true one-off, unlike any place we've been before.

The next time, visit in autumn - March and April in the southern hemisphere - after summer vacation, he says. Local tourists go home; the leaves turn red and yellow.

As the growing number of foreign travelers have discovered touring this 40-island archipelago, at 42 degrees south, west of the Gulf of Ancud, every day brings a new surprise.

After a two-day stopover in Santiago, Chile's capital, where Salina, a new friend and movie fan, said Chiloe Island, also known as Chiloe Grande, reminded her of "the shire," I wasn't sure what we'd find."Oh, take a look! It's breathtaking," gushed the woman who'd shared our cab from the airport. Beyond the windows lay a wonderland of rolling hills, grassy meadows, leafy trees, and half-hidden vales sloping down to the sea. Only the hobbits were missing.

"It's so familiar," she said, sinking down onto the sofa, her expectations ajar. "I know this is Chile, but I feel as if I'm somewhere else, in Vermont or England."

Or Vancouver or Seattle. Why, I wondered, did such an inviting and eminently livable place go unnoticed for so long? With navigable bays, a sea full of fish, rich farmland, dependable rain, and a temperate climate, Chiloe could be a major Pacific port.

The next morning, we headed to the farm market, always an unfailing opportunity for colorful photo-ops. The usual fresh farm produce, raised locally, was a vegetarian's delight:

Monday, July 13, 2015

cabbages; lettuce; tomatoes; onions; carrots; apples; purple, yellow, and white potatoes; and honey; breads; fish; and cheese. The same wool that made my doll reappeared as nubby gray and brown shawls, hats, socks, and blankets.

But what were those ugly dried lumps suspended on long strings, and the dark-green bricks, and the jars full of stringy stalks? And the muddy-colored, folded-leather things? I've said yes to some strange edibles in my time - grilled warthog and seal oil ice cream, among them - but this food, if it was food, looked like expired military field rations.

Once again, Guridi stepped up with answers. The foods on the strings were smoked, dried sea squirts, weird marine creatures pried out of rocks at low tide; and two kinds of smoked mussels. The stalks that looked like sugar cane were the stems of the nalca plant, the so-called giant Chilean rhubarb, so large and healthy it looks carnivorous. The "bricks" were dried seaweed, and the folded "leather" was bull kelp, leaves harvested from the sea, dried, folded into squares, and tied together with the stems, Christmas gifts from Neptune.

"It's the old way of doing things, so nothing would be wasted," said Guridi.

It was an accident of history, of course, that shut Chiloe off from the world. After Spain conquered Peru, the conquistadores headed south, expecting to walk over Chile's indigenous people. But the Mapuche tribes living south of the Bio Bio River weren't so easily pushed around. Whomping the Spaniards, they chased away the remaining settlers, a group of Spanish and Huilliche Indians, who fled from the mainland to Chiloe.

Alone on the island, the new arrivals intermarried, blending their cultures and creating today's mostly mestizo population. Early on, Jesuit priests arrived and, traveling from one island to the next, encouraged the converts to build churches. Over time, 70 were erected, each made entirely of wood joined by wooden pegs. Today, 17 of these exquisite expressions of primitive art have been designated World Heritage Sites and are Chiloe's best-known, most-visited attractions.

The Jesuits, volunteers from a host of European countries, sketched architectural styles they remembered from home: neoclassical, baroque, gothic, and others. But the villagers who did the work were skilled boatbuilders.

"The Jesuits knew what a church should look like, but no one knew how to build one," said Carlos Miranda, a guide at the Tierra Chiloe Hotel, who leads cultural tours of the islands. "What they did know how to build was boats," he said, escorting us to the church in Rilan, to look at the ceiling, built

Also on Philly.com

NEWS:

Philly struggles to hire black officers

BUSINESS:

Independent bookstores innovate for new customers

SPORTS:

Flyers name Phantoms coach

HEALTH:

What's really in those sports supplements?

ENTERTAINMENT:

'Bachelorette': Tonight there are three

REAL ESTATE:

Phila. single-family home prices soar in 2Q, data show

"exactly like an upside-down boat."

Motoring across the bay to Chelin and Quehue, two tiny outer islands, we stopped to inspect the bare bones of the Chelin Church, in the midst of a renovation, then anchored in the cove at Quehue, for two perfect hours of kayaking.

The churches are famous. But Chiloe's signature buildings are the "palafitos," ancient ramshackle wood houses built on stilts over Castro's bay. No one could tell me why these houses, decorated like Easter eggs, weren't built on dry land, but one guide thought they had originally belonged to fishermen. With tidal variations as high as 23 feet, being over the water might keep a fishing boat afloat.

The same tidal variation, in fact, is why thousands of shallow wetlands and estuaries dot Chiloe's east and west shores, making the islands a top birding destination.

Driving up and down roads that resemble roller coasters, I wondered whether the hills were moraines and whether Chiloe was glaciated during the last ice age. Apparently so. Despite another rainy day, we joined trained naturalist Pablo Mansilla, a guide with Chiloetnico, a local tour company, for a nature walk through an old-growth rain forest in the southernmost sector.

Exhibits at the interpretive center near the entrance help to make sense of the park's indigenous flora and fauna, many predating the last ice age. The brush in this forest was so tangled and thick and the ground cover so mossy and spongy that bushwhacking was literally impossible. Thank goodness for the long loop of raised boardwalks that gave us a peek at the way it used to be, and answers to at least one of Chiloe's many mysteries.

About Chiloe

Chiloe is a four-season destination. March and April, fall in the southern hemisphere, are good months to visit, after vacationing Chileans have gone home. The weather is warm, the colors are changing, and hotel rates drop. Rain showers are frequent year-round, except in winter, when it may snow; bring a raincoat or parka.

Lodging: Hotels, inns and B&Bs are available in most price categories. For a more deluxe experience, the top-ranked Hotel Parque Quilquico (www.hpq.cl/en) offers rustic luxury. The Tierra Chiloe (www.tierrachiloe.com) provides minimalist contemporary design. Both serve fine cuisine and offer room rates with or without meals, spa and massage services, swimming pool and fitness equipment, guided tours and outdoor recreation and airport transfers.

Flying there: The airline connections with the least elapsed time are on LAN flights from the U.S. to Santiago, with a single stop in Lima, Peru. Other airlines also fly to Santiago, but with more stops and/or longer airport waits.

Anne Z. Cooke
TRIBUNE NEWS SERVICE