

## Terremoto en Chile

We had been in Valdivia for 4 days, the first part of a week's holiday in this beautiful city in the south of Chile, located on the estuary of the River Callecalle when the earthquake struck! Valdivia was, in 1960, the location of the epicentre of the most powerful earthquake in recorded history but we were not anticipating another. Asleep in our first floor hotel room at 3.40 a.m. on Saturday 27 Feb we were awoken by, at first, a light shaking. By the time we had properly awoken and switched on the light the shaking had become more violent and we realised this was not just another small tremor. As we got out of bed to get dressed the oscillations got more and more violent and the light went out - a power failure. The noise and confusion increased as bottles and lamps began to crash to the floor. I was trying to put my trousers on but could not stand up properly as the bed decided to go on a trip, and was hitting me in the back of the legs forcing me to sit back down again. All this time the violent shaking continued.

Providentially there was a full moon that night, and we had left the curtains a little bit open, the moonlight allowed us to see pictures swinging madly on the walls before crashing to the floor,

bottles and glasses falling out of the fridge, which had opened of its own, and the bed moving steadily across the floor with each oscillation. I thought the building would collapse and we were about to die, but after nearly 3 minutes, which seemed like hours, the shaking reduced and stopped. We had survived! All was pitch black in the corridor outside our room and we could hear other guests moving about. We quickly picked up important personal items, grabbed coats, jumpers and blankets, and with the help of our neighbour who had a torch, made our way out of the hotel into a chilly moonlit night.

All was dark and still, not a light to be seen except for a few mobile phones, which made rather poor torches. The night porter was checking the rooms of the 6 storey building and bringing out remaining guests. Some 50 people were standing shattered and cold in the dark small garden in front of the hotel.

After an hour or so some of the braver residents moved back into the foyer to make use of the seating, but the frequent after shocks sent us all scurrying out again into the garden on a number of occasions.

Just as dawn was breaking at about 7.30 a.m., the lights were restored and we all made our way down to a poor breakfast in the hotel basement dining room. The lights began to swing on a number of occasions but we managed to complete our meal and make our way back to our room to tidy up, get washed and fully dressed, but ready to run at any minute.

We tried to phone Santiago but all was dead, both fixed phone and mobiles. So we switched on the TV and to our surprise it worked, and we were able to watch the first reports of a terrible earthquake with its epicentre about half way between us in Valdivia and Santiago. The first reports were sketchy and brief but we learned a quake of 8.8 richter had occurred with its epicentre 350 km N of us just off the coast.

We decided to go for a walk to view the effects in Valdivia which we understood had suffered a 6.5 richter quake. The local damage was fairly minor however with most of the city surviving well.

As the day passed we realized our holiday was over and we needed to return home to Santiago as soon as possible, but everything had stopped functioning.

All the shops were closed and we heard reports that flights had been suspended and the main road north cut in many places. Happily our hotel was still functioning, although most guests, including a large group of Argentines, were packing up and leaving. We went to the airline office but no sooner had we arrived than there was a severe aftershock, the power went off and the office closed, leaving more than fifty people waiting in the street.

Gradually after a few days things began to function again but all the time the aftershocks continued day and night. We were able to obtain a flight home, one of the first, due to our age and my heart condition but the local airport was closed so we needed a 3½ hour coach journey south to Puerto Montt to get a flight to Santiago on 3/3.

Santiago airport was badly damaged and closed when we landed, but a few flights were operating although the terminal building was closed. After a long wait in the plane we were instructed to pick up our luggage and carry it from the plane, around the side of the terminal, and out into an improvised taxi and bus park.

And so we arrived home with trepidation not knowing what to expect in our flat, but to our surprise and delight the building had resisted the quake, and although our flat was in some disorder there was little damage, and after a few days we had it back in order.

The aftershocks began to diminish and life returned to a sort of normality in our part of the City. Much of the country however had not been so lucky. Just after the main shock, which devastated a number of towns and cities south of Santiago, a tidal wave had hit the coast flattening hundreds of small poor coastal resorts and fishing communities between Santiago and Valdivia. Most of these towns and villages were poor with houses and buildings constructed from timber or adobe, which were destroyed, if not by the quake by the wave leaving some 500 people dead and many thousands homeless. A disaster for the country and many of its people.

The aftershocks continued and on 11<sup>th</sup> March the inauguration of the new President, elected in January, and the new Government took place in Valparaiso, in the Congress building. Just as all the important guests, presidents of other countries, ministers, ex Chilean presidents and other dignitaries were seated, a 6.9 aftershock struck shaking violently the Congress building.

We also experienced the quake at home watching the proceedings on the TV, and were unsure whether to stay and watch or leave the building, like the President we decided to stay, but the faces of the assembled guests gave away their fear and stress. The ceremony continued but few appeared to be concentrating on the proceedings.

The Chilean emergency service gave a tidal wave warning and all people close to sea level were formally advised via radio and TV to seek higher ground. Chaos ensued as people ran for higher parts. The Congress building is located close to sea level, although the ceremonial hall is not at the bottom of the building, so we had the spectacle of the inauguration proceeding while people around the building were running away.

Two further tremors struck during the ceremony a 6.5 and a 6.2 (richter) and the new President gave instructions to shorten the proceedings and evacuate the building as soon as possible. There were, according to the emergency services 17 tremors during that day. Still the aftershocks continue, frequently strong with many each day and night. The smaller ones now pass almost without comment, like heavy showers on an April day in England.

The experts say we can expect between 2 and 6 months like this. The stronger ones bring more damage and fear of tsunamis; everybody seems to be suffering from sleeplessness and stress. Today at the supermarket the checkout queues were long, the reason, so many checkout staff were off sick.

But the people south of Santiago continue to suffer without shelter or work as the government struggles to cope. Many are still without sufficient food, clothing or water. The charitable agencies are doing their best but the task is enormous. We have had a lucky escape not so hundreds of thousands of Chileans.

### Sad and interesting facts

- There is almost no glass in the country to repair broken windows.
- The earthquake wrecked the glass factory and 80% of the stock
- Building material prices are rising fast
- Very few Chileans insured their houses or cars against earthquake damage
- In Santiago alone the debris from damaged buildings is sufficient to form a small mountain
- Many small businesses have been destroyed leaving the owners with no means to pay off their business loans

- Many property owners whose houses have been destroyed have no insurance and therefore have a large mortgage but no property
- The generating system was damaged and therefore blackouts are likely
- Autumn is here with many families sleeping in tents or worse. The temporary re-housing schemes are struggling with shortage of materials
- In many areas schools and courts have been destroyed leaving children with no education and long delays in the justice system
- Hospitals have also had to be closed leaving only emergency cases to be treated
- Many churches and national monuments have disappeared

Nick Tredinnick 24/03/2010

### Knitted Squares

Nick & Paz wish to thank everyone who has been knitting woollen squares for orphaned children in Chile. Following the earthquake they had already six made-up blankets to pass on to quake victims. If you would like to knit squares please speak with Valerie.

Andrew Tredinnick