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## Coffee and the art of seduction

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Having flown overnight from New Zealand and checked into our hotel, we were wandering around central Santiago in the kind of daze that you only get from skipping over half the world's time zones in 12 hours. We badly needed to stay awake and staggered into the first espresso bar we found.

This was not your average Starbucks - a highly stylish place, it was tricked out in chrome and marble, a sort of costly 1960s retro look. The coffee was fantastic - strong and treacly, served in dinky little cups. In fact, the only slightly strange thing was the waitresses. They were all tall, very good looking and wearing incredibly tight-fitting dresses, so short that they barely covered their underwear. The uniforms also had a square strategically cut out of the chest to reveal so much cleavage as to be perilously close to shocking. Still, in my jet-lagged state, I just thought this was part of the chi-chi look, a Chilean version of Sir Terence's bullet-bra cigarette girls. Oh, and all the customers except my girlfriend were men.

Had we been a little less jet-lagged, we'd probably have realised we were in an upmarket version of one of Santiago's famous smutty coffee bars. There are hundreds of these places in the city and men come in to meet their friends, discuss politics, smoke cigarettes and, most importantly, ogle the waitresses. There's no touching, but there is an awful lot of looking.

In fact, as I subsequently discovered, these bars are something of a city institution. Eight years ago, an entrepreneur took the concept even further and the Chilean capital now boasts over 100 bars where the waitresses serve coffee in nothing but skimpy *bikiCafenis*. Indeed, so successful were these sexpresso shops that a businessman tried to export the concept to Argentina, where it bombed. The Argentinians, you see, are used to topless women on their beaches, and were singularly unimpressed by scantily clad cappuccino *chicas*.

This, perhaps, is the key to understanding Santiago - and indeed the

whole of Chile. In many ways it's not very South American at all and the Latin exuberance that the continent is famed for lies on the other side of the Andes, in Argentina and Brazil. The reasons for this are historic - many of the Chilean settlers were German. And it shows: the economy is in pretty good shape, the buses run on time and men like their coffee served to them by waitresses in underwear.

Santiago differs from its trans-Andean counterparts in another big way too. Unlike Buenos Aires and Rio, it's not much of a tourist destination. While the airport is a major hub for the western side of the continent, most of the foreigners passing through are businesspeople or tourists on their way to Peru or Patagonia. As well as making Santiago a city that is very much itself, this also means that, outside the international hotels, hardly anyone speaks English.

Nonetheless, it's an agreeable place to spend a few days. Situated on a broad plain between the Andes and the Pacific, it enjoys a setting bettered only by Rio's. On clear days, the city's backdrop is the white saw-tooth snow caps of one of the highest cordelias in the world's second-highest mountain range. Downtown, the city itself is a businesslike place with a pleasant pedestrianised zone and good shopping. The centre has a few fine old colonial buildings, including the cathedral, some decent museums and parks, and its mixture of the old and new is oddly reminiscent of London.

Our first Chilean lunch, though showed how cosmetic this similarity was. To eat in Santiago is to experience gastronomic time travel back to the mid 1970s. Of course, like any city, you can find expensive restaurants serving international fare, but the food in local eateries has a distinctly retro feel to it. When was the last time you saw a piece of beef with carrots threaded through it? Or halved, stuffed avocado as a starter?

None of which is to say that Chilean food is bad. It just seems rather plain to those of us used to a dozen different cuisines on our doorsteps. The meat can be very, very good indeed. Ask for a hamburger and you get something weighing half a kilo and probably made from ground steak. With beef as cheap as it is in South America, people don't seem to bother with the cheaper cuts.

Chile's most ubiquitous culinary leitmotif, however, is something truly revolting. It is known as the *completo* (meaning complete). This is nothing more or less than an oversized hot dog with absolutely everything (ketchup, mustard, mayonnaise, pickles and condiments) on it. It is quite as disgusting as it sounds, but there appear to be few things closer to the nation's gastronomic heart.

If Chilean gastronomy is something of a puzzle, you're on safe ground with drink. That evening - oddly perky despite our scrambled body clocks - we went out in the Bellavista district. The city centre is eerily quiet at night, but this riverside district, Santiago's equivalent of Soho or the Marais, has dozens of bars. It also has dozens of opportunities to

knock back pisco sour, the national drink. And no pisco sour you've drunk in the UK will prepare you for the real thing.

Made with lime juice, pisco (a clear brandy), sugar and egg white, it is absolutely delicious. But nobody in Chile would even think about bothering with a measure. Our barman guessed each drink contained about 80ml of pisco, which weighs in at about half the drink. Two piscos and you're drunk; three and you can barely walk. Most "gringos" only realise this when they try and stand up after three or four.

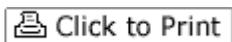
Pleasant though Santiago is, it's primarily a business centre and if you have a few more days, it's worth either going up to the mountains or down to the coast. We wanted to combine a bit of both, so, nursing crushing pisco hangovers, we headed up to La Serena, about four hours north. A former copper mining port, La Serena is now Chile's premier beach resort, a pretty little colonial town with broad Pacific beaches and great seafood. As we'd arrived in the late afternoon, we decided to check out La Serena's oddball attraction first. Like Tenerife, in the Canaries, the place is that curious combination of resort and astronomy mecca. High in the Andean foothills above town there are dozens of white shell-like observatories, several of which are open to the public. Astronomers love northern Chile because it almost never rains and, by South American standards, it is developed and politically stable. It was a wonderfully clear night for a spot of star-gazing - just like the 340 other wonderfully clear nights you get a year in these parts.

The next day we spent on the beach. A word of warning, though: although the *playas* are clean and wide and the surf is good, the Pacific off Chile is not the ocean that most of us would recognise from holidays in Asia, nor should you expect a Rio experience. Thanks to the Humboldt Current, which shoots up from Antarctica, Chilean sea temperatures are not far off those at home. Indeed, as a rare English-speaking barman (in a rare unisex coffee shop) said to us when we told him we found the sea a little, well, bracing, "It's OK for you - you're British, and it's OK for Chileans. But whenever the Spanish come here, they bitch, bitch, bitch all the time about how cold the water is."

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