Chile

Location and Geography

The nation of Chile is a republic located in South America. It is bordered on the northern side by Peru, on the eastern border of Bolivia and Argentina, and bounded on the south and west by the Pacific Ocean. Chile averages in width by only 180 km (110 mi) or less, but measures in great length from north to south at approximately 4,270 km (about 2,650 mi). Cape Horn is the southernmost point of South America, which is preceded by a series of Chilean islands found in the South Pacific. These islands include Wellington Island, Juan Fernandez Islands, Easter Island, and Sala y Gomez. The entire nation of Chile contains an area of 756,626 sq km (292,135 sq mi). The republic of Chile also claims a portion of the continent of Antarctica. Latitudinal, Chile can be separated into three geographical and climatologically regions: the northern (arid), central (Mediterranean), and southern (temperate marine) regions. In the northern region of Chile, the ranges of the Andes are at its widest, forming very broad plateaus and containing many mountains. Chile’s highest peak, Ojos del Sado, is approximately (6,880m/22,572ft). The country’s finest natural harbors and agricultural heartland can be found in the central region of Chile. This region is very fertile and is known as the Central Valley. The southern region disappears below the sea and is indented by numerous fjords. Chile is geologically instable and is susceptible to earthquakes and volcanic activity.

Climate

Chile has a diversity of climates due to its great and vast latitudinal range. In general, Chile’s temperatures are influenced by oceanic activity. The northern region
contains an area of mostly desert and is considered one of the driest places on earth. The average temperature, depending on location in the north, ranges from 54-62 degrees Fahrenheit. The central region experiences a Mediterranean-like climate. The southern region is cooler and experiences year-round rainfall. The average annual temperature in the southern region is about 44 degrees Fahrenheit.

History

Ferdinand Magellan, a Portuguese explorer, was the first European to visit Chile in the year 1520. The region at the time was known to its native people as Tchili a Native American word meaning “snow.” Araucanians dominated most of southern Chile, a Native American tribe noted for their outstanding and relentless fighting ability. The northern tribes of Chile had been subjugated around the 1400’s by the Inca’s of Peru. In 1535, the Spanish had completed their conquest of Peru and then sought overland into Chile on a gold-hunting expedition. The expedition failed after three years. The Spanish settled in the region fighting for over 100 years with the natives to gain permanent colonization. However, in 1810, Chile formed a coalition with other Spanish colonies to gain their independence and break away from the rule under Spain. Thereafter, the Chilean’s celebrate September 18 as their independence day which was won in 1810.

Population

The population of Chile in 2001 was estimated as 15,328,467, giving the country an overall population density of 20 people per sq km (52 per sq mi). Compared to other South American countries, Chile has a relatively homogenous population. Early Spanish settlers intermarried with the Native Americans. Spanish and Native American
ancestry constitute 93% of Chile’s current population. Immigration to Chile was mildly encouraged compared to the other South American countries. German immigrants have, however, been an important influence in the Valdivia-Puerto Montt area. Only 3% of the population is pure Native American and less than 2% is of unmixed European blood.

**Currency**

Chile’s basic unit of currency is known as the Chilean peso (509 pesos equal U.S. $1; 1999 average). The peso was introduced in 1975 to replace the escudo.

**Education**

In Chile, eight years of free and compulsory learning is provided for all children between the ages of 6 and 13. A preschool program is also conducted. Chile’s school systems are administered by the national government. Chile’s national literacy rate is almost 100%, one of the highest in all of Latin America. Among the institutions of higher learning, the University of Chile is one of the most highly respected universities in the world.

**Language**

The official language of Chile is Spanish and is virtually spoken by the entire Chile population. There is, however, limited use of the Native American languages.

**Religion**

The Roman Catholic Church is a huge force in the Chilean life and society, although the separation of church and state was instituted in 1925. Roman Catholics make up 77% of Chile’s population. About one-half of the remaining population is
Pentecostal Protestant. A small minority of the Native Americans practice traditional religions.

**Agriculture**

The bulk of Chile’s agricultural activity occurs in the Central Valley, except for sheep raising that takes place in the south. Chile exports more than twice the agricultural products that it takes in. Today, Chile’s leading crops include grapes, apples, root crops such as sugar beets and potatoes, and maize or corn. Chile even has a winemaking market. Animals primarily raised in Chile are sheep, cattle, and pigs. Sheep dominate the livestock industry with about 4.1 million head, with a wool output of 17,000 metric tons.

**Trade**

Chile brings in a value of 15.6 billion dollars from their exports. Their primary export includes metals, minerals, fruits, vegetables, wood pulp and paper products, and chemicals. Principal sources of imports come from such countries as the United States, Brazil, Argentina, Germany, Japan, Italy, and Mexico.

**Principle Cities**

Valparaiso, is a principal seaport; Vina del Mar, a popular resort; Concepcion, an agricultural and industrial center; and Santiago, the capital and largest city.

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