For some students, living with a great host family can be the best part of a study abroad experience. When you share a love with one of your new family members, then the experience can become even stronger. Liz’s time in Santiago, Chile is marked by her relationship with her host mom, her mama chilena.

—Lyle Ring, manager, Hutton International Experiences Program

Ensayo de Santiago

By Liz Rice

More than any single experience, my strongest memory is of the many Sunday lunches I would spend with my host family. My mamá chilena (my Chilean mom) is a 52-year-old champion marathon runner, and some Sundays I would get up and do early-morning runs with her and her running club. Afterwards, we would hop in her boyfriend’s (who is also a marathoner) beat-up old pickup truck and careen to the open-air market that they claimed had the best empanadas in Santiago. Empanadas are somewhat like turnovers—a baked or fried dough filled with any combination of meat, cheese, vegetables, fruit, or anything else—and are sold in every town in Chile. I became partial to the special ones filled with asparagus, spinach, goat cheese, and hard-boiled egg.

After buying the empanadas, we would head back to our apartment building, which overlooks the River Mapocho, the highly-polluted river that runs through Santiago. While Alberto, mamá’s boyfriend, rested in the bedroom and drank a beer or a pisco sour, the Chilean national drink, mamá and I would prepare soup, salad, and other things for the formal lunch. Eventually Alberto would get up and set the table, and we’d all go into the dining room to eat and converse.

It was during these days, during the long runs, food preparation, and lunches that I learned the most. I have been exceedingly lucky in many counts: firstly, I was put with a woman who liked to run, and through this activity I was able to bond with her. We spent a lot of time running and racing together. With her, I participated in three races in Santiago, and I even won one! I also became a temporary part of her elite running club, Los Santiago Runners (yes, their team’s name is in English—even this, I learned, can be a sign of elitism).

Secondly, I had a mamá who is educated, open-minded, and was patient enough to answer any question I might have, no matter how polemic or ignorant it was. She is an independent and intelligent woman with whom I felt a grand rapport and connection, both in the role of daughter and friend.

Thirdly, she epitomized the changing Chilean society. She was in a supervising position at her job with the government, she left her parents in the countryside at a young age to make her own

Cecilia Vidal, my mamá chilena
fortune in Santiago, she is divorced and dating again, and has two successful young daughters—not to mention the sixteen host daughters like me that have lived with her before I did.

Santiago is nothing if not a schizophrenic city, with its cultural and historical stories divided against themselves, and its future utterly undecided and constantly debated. Living where I did, in the central neighborhood, I could walk for fifteen minutes and pass through the anomalous Barrio Paris-Londres, or the London-Paris borough, where one Chilean leader had tried to bring the city up to European standards, the Telefonica tower, a steel-and-glass building that houses the most powerful communications company in South America, and next to it, built of stone and wood, is one oldest Catholic churches in the city—alongside which has recently sprung up a Lutheran church.

Even more than this, I took classes in two universities. One is comparable to Notre Dame, in that it draws a more conservative and richer demographic. The other is more reactionary and revolutionary, to say the least. Seeing the difference, both academically and socially, was remarkable. Living in such a divided and rapidly-changing environment, both politically (their president is a woman whose relatives were tortured by a former dictator, whose regime is still in living memory), as a city (the seven-month-old public transportation system has caused dozens of riots in protest), and socially (divorce was just legalized a year ago) often caused my head to spin.

I believe that you can’t truly know your own country and culture until you leave it. Although I can’t yet see the full scope of what I learned and how I’ve grown and changed during my sojourn in Santiago, I feel stronger as an individual and as a woman.

My host sister, Catalina, my mamá, and I after my goodbye dinner