

Exchange in Universidad Técnica Federico Santa María, Valparaíso, Chile

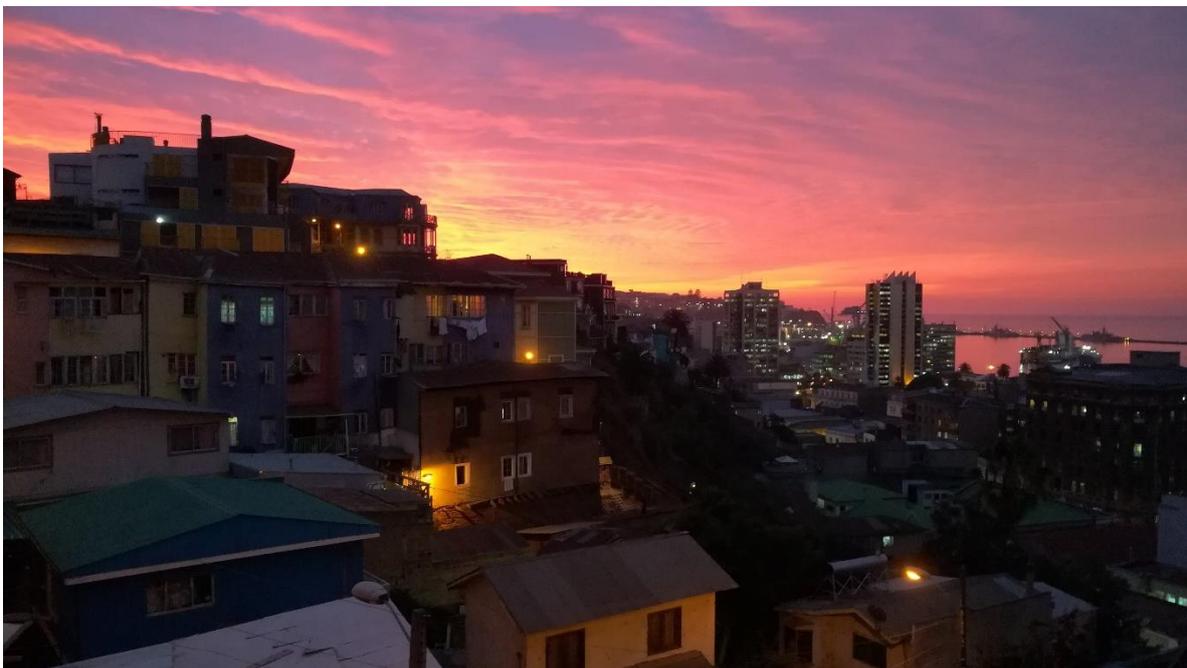
Spring semester 2018

Eeva Tirkkonen

Valparaíso

I'm a fourth-year business student and I spent the spring 2018 studying in Valparaíso, Chile. Located within 1,5-2-hour bus drive from the capital Santiago, Valparaíso is a popular destination both for tourist and exchange students. Valparaíso, or Valpo, is known for its over 40 hills, colourful street art and bohemian vibes. Valparaíso is located right next to Viña del Mar, a popular beach destination.

Chile is an excellent destination to practice your Spanish and learn more about South America. It is a country with extremely beautiful nature, and a destination I recommend with all my heart! It's amazing how variable the scenery can be: in the same country you can find glaciers and mountains in Patagonia, and the driest desert of the world in Atacama. Chile is also a good starting point for travelling to other South American countries, and most exchange students would travel before the semester, during the holidays and/or after the semester.



Cerro Bellavista in Valparaíso

The university

Universidad Técnica Federico Santa María, or USM, has different campuses in Valparaíso, Santiago, Rancagua and one in Ecuador. Valparaíso is the main campus, and it offers education in the fields of engineering (electrical, environmental, mechanical, chemical and so on) and business (with the name of commercial engineering/ingeniería comercial). USM is a private university, like most of the universities in Chile. Most of the courses are in Spanish only, however, there are couple of courses in English offered to the exchange students.

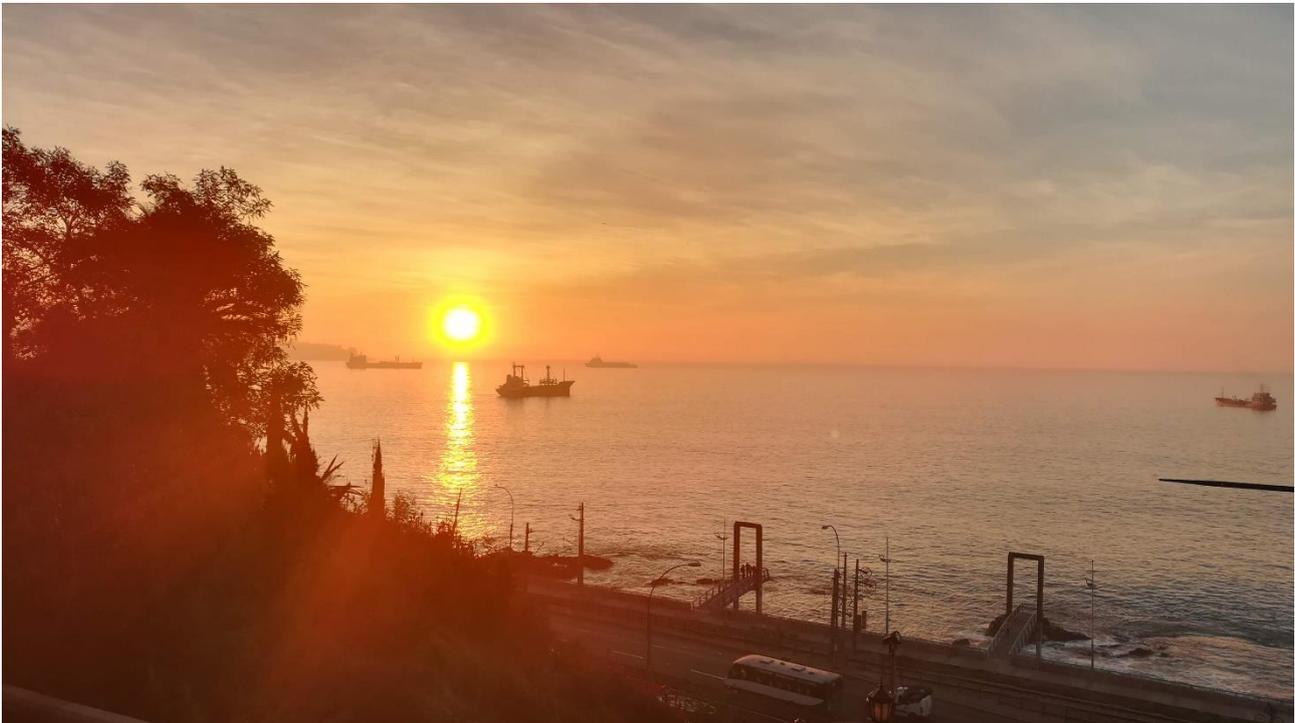
The USM building is in the border between Valparaíso and Viña, overlooking the sea. It has football courts, a swimming pool and a library with sea views – to start with. There are also computer rooms (that are freezing during the winter).



There are school cafeterias, the lunch costs around 3€ and includes a main course, small salad and a soup, a juice, fruit and bread. To eat in the cafeteria, you have to first go to an office to buy a green card, and with this green card you can go to the cafeteria. Mostly I ate

in different restaurants close by – the street behind USM is full of them. On campus there are some other cafeterias offering food as well (like in the terrace of P building).

There's also a doctor on campus – however I did not use the services. You can print things in the library, but also near the uni there are small quiosks where you can go and print. Some teachers did want the assignments to be returned printed, so this comes in handy.



Amazing sunsets from the campus!

Preparations for the exchange

Applying for the exchange is easy, for more information about the documents required you can consult the international office either in LUT or in USM. When applying, you'll need a certificate of Spanish which you can get at LUT.

Once you have got the acceptance letter from USM (we got it at the beginning of December), you can apply for the student visa. Remember also to check that your travel insurance is valid for the whole period of your stay. It might be also wise to take more than one (credit) card with you, in case one is lost.

Orientation and starting the semester

The semester started in the end of February with an orientation day where we were explained the rules and practical things of the university (for example what to do in the case of an earthquake). We also had a campus tour with our tutor and a hangout with the other students after the official part.

Some people had already arrived to Valparaíso earlier to do an intensive language course of two weeks (with extra cost). There was also a possibility to take free Spanish classes during the semester – they had different levels from beginner to advanced.

The classes started in the beginning of March, and we had two weeks to try out different courses until we had to fix our timetables. After the two weeks there was the *Semana Mechona* – the “freshman week”. Most classes were cancelled, and teachers encouraged us to use the time to travel. We also had an official holiday week in May.

Officially the semester should have ended on 13th of July. However, it depends on the courses and final exams when the semester finishes. The year I was studying there was a student strike, so the Chilean students finished their semester later than planned, but most exchange student courses ended already in June.

Courses

My schedule had courses that had lessons mostly from 8 to 15.30, but some courses had also evening lessons going until 21. The classes with a lot of exchange students were flexible, but the ones with more Chilean students had usually stricter attendance requirements (approx. 75% of the lessons). As a difference to my studies at LUT, in USM there was fewer groupwork and more individual assignments such as essays.

I had the following courses:

Identidad Chilena / Chilean Identity (in English)

A fun course about Chilean culture. The aim of the course was to write a book that included basically three different essays, an interview, interpretation of street art in Valpo and a

description of a visit to a local indigenous community. Besides lectures we had field trips, such as to the local fisherman cove, the Mapuche community and a museum.

Civilizaciones Precolombinas / Pre-Columbian Civilizations (in English)

An easy course about pre-Columbian cultures (Mapuche in Chile, Mayans, Inkas and so on). Helps to understand the history before the colonization, which will be useful when travelling in Peru and Bolivia, for example. The course had a group presentation and a midterm where we had to interpret the symbols in pre-Columbian art.

Desarrollo en Latinoamerica / Development of Latin America (in English)

A really interesting course, where we went through the most important events of countries in Latin America. I'd really recommend this one to understand more about the current situation and the politics of the countries. The course assignments included two presentations and two written essays regarding the course topics. The course also included a visit to the Chilean congress.

Historia de Chile: Politica, Derechos Humanos y Evolución Cultural / History of Chile: Politics, Human rights and Cultural development (in Spanish)

A great, in-depth course about Chilean history from independence to this date. During the course we had one essay-style exam, another essay to write at home and a presentation. The course is demanding, but I feel like I learned a lot and improved my Spanish.

Recursos Humanos / Human resources (in Spanish)

The only course I took from the business department (most of the other courses were similar to the ones I already had done at LUT). I wouldn't really recommend this one, as it only consisted of lectures that weren't that interesting in my opinion. We had also an exam (in pairs), and some other assignments. Because of the student strike, the assignments had to be changed in the middle of the course. We were supposed to have a final exam, but instead we had to turn in an additional case assignment.

Finding an apartment

I didn't have an apartment before coming to Valparaíso, but I found one quickly through a website called Compartodepto (www.compartodepto.cl). It's common that students share apartments so plenty of options are available.

You can either live in Valpo, or Viña, since the university is located in the between of these two cities. For the first two months I live in Cerro Barón, within 20 minutes of walking distance of the university. I really liked the location as it was close to the school, but also near the supermarket and bus station, and near by I could take the bus to go everywhere else I wanted. After two months I had to change apartments, so I spent the rest of the time in Cerro Bellavista. This area is closer to the city center and areas like Cerro Alegre and Concepción where a lot of my friends were living. Some of my friends also lived in Placeres, just above the university.

I would recommend searching the apartment once you arrive. You can stay couple days in a hostel or Airbnb, explore the city and see what area you like. Also you want to see the apartment before you move in! Most houses do not have heating, so remember to pack your warm clothes to survive the Chilean winter.

Rents are in general cheaper than in Finland. I paid approximately 215-220€/month for my room in shared apartments, with all costs included. Some people pay the rent in cash, but if you want to pay online, I recommend looking at the website TransferWise (www.transferwise.com) that offers cheaper bank transfers from different currencies.

Free time activities

The school offers plenty of sport classes from tennis to Latin dances – usually they inform the timetables on Facebook (Defider USM), and students organize different workshops, like yoga. The Andes offer great opportunities for outdoor activities: hiking in summer or about any season, or downhill skiing in the winter. You can also try out surfing or sandboarding in the dunes of Concón. You can also explore the different hills of Valpo, and spot street art – or visit museums like La Sebastiana (the house of the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda) or the pre-Columbian museums in Viña or Santiago. There's also plenty of nightlife in Valpo!

Good to know before arriving

Student protests: In 2006 and 2011 Chile had huge protests and manifestations as the students were claiming for better education. In spring 2018 we saw new protests emerging, however, this time the topic was different: sexism and women's rights in the universities. These protests might involve demonstrations, students taking over buildings and strikes. During this spring, the students were striking over a month. What this meant for the exchange students, that the teachers were supposed to organize us private classes and extra assignments, so we would be able to finish the semester on time. So be ready for all sort of changes that might happen.

Earthquakes: Chile is an earthquake-prone zone. However, we had one medium-sized earthquake during my exchange, but nobody in our apartment felt anything. There are a lot of minor earthquakes, but normally the Chileans don't get bothered about them.

Chilean Spanish: It's a lot different from the Spanish you might have learned, but not impossible to understand! People use a lot of slang words like cachai, weón, po, and don't pronounce all the letters. But you'll get used to it.

Safety: Yes, it's South America, and you might have heard all the horror stories of people getting robbed and so on. Robberies and pickpocketing do happen, but I would say Valparaíso is relatively safe (compared to some other SA cities), if you take precautions and be careful with your things.

Winter: Even though it doesn't get to the temperatures we have in Finland, it does get cold in Chile (3-4 degrees during the night in Valpo at worst). And why this is an issue, is that the houses don't usually have heating nor proper insulation, including the university. Also, it doesn't rain often, but when it does, the street become like rivers and some houses might get water inside.

Prices: Chile is not so cheap as you might think, for example when it comes to groceries. It's cheaper to buy fruit in the market on the street than in the supermarket. Still many things are cheaper compared to Finland, like bus tickets and eating out.

SIM cards: You can get a prepaid card from operators like Claro, WOM and Movistar. Recharges can be done in pharmacies and sometimes supermarkets or small shops.

Withdrawing money: Usually the banks charge commission when you withdraw money – Scotiabank was an exception.