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FINDING MIDDLE EARTH

Story by Anne Z. Cooke, Photography by Steve Haggerty/ColorWorld

The woman selling the hand-knit orange and pink dolls at the Castro town farm market, for example. She's trying to tell me about her wool, I'm trying to answer, and we might as well be speaking Pig Latin. We ought to understand each other; we're speaking Spanish. After all, Chiloé (CHEE-low-way) is part of Chile, the nation. But we're at an impasse.

"She's says the wool comes from her sheep and she spins it herself," says long-time resident Rodrigo Guridi, our guide for the day. Though the Chilean mainland isn't that far away, he explains, the island was isolated for nearly three centuries, enough time to develop its own set of lifestyles, traditions and a kind of Spanish patois, one that my ear just isn't recognizing. "You'll have to stay longer if you want to pick up the accent," he says. On our next visit he advises, winking conspiratorially, "come in the fall, after summer vacation ends and the tourists from Santiago go home. And stay longer." Now he tells me, I'm thinking. Why didn't I know that before?

Nor was the accent the only surprise. "Chiloé reminds me of the shire," said Salina, a friend from Santiago who vacationed here the previous year. "You know, the shire, in middle earth, in the Lord of the Rings movie?" No, I couldn't picture it. But I got it when I checked into my hotel outside Castro, the Parque Quilquico, perched on a hilltop overlooking a long, blue bay.

"Oh, take a look! It's breathtaking," gushed Elaine from Arizona who shared our cab from the airport. We looked and there lay a wonderland of rolling green hills, grassy meadows, leafy trees and half-hidden vales sloping down to the sea. A dozen fat, brown and white cows grazed in the foreground, enjoying the last warm days of summer. Only the hobbits were missing. "I know this is Chile, but I feel as if I'm somewhere else, in Vermont maybe, or even England."



It's no surprise that visitors to Chiloé are reminded of the Shire in the film "Lord of the Rings"



The Quilquico Hotel near Castro, an eco-friendly hotel, lodges guests in eight rooms built on stilts in the Palafitos style.

The next morning Elaine and I headed into Castro to the farm market, a reliable clue to what people were eating and the local cuisine might include. A cornucopia of fresh vegetables filled the stalls: cabbage, lettuce, tomatoes, onions, carrots, apples, four varieties of potatoes were heaped in pile, next to jars of honey, loaves of fresh bread, stacks of home cheese and tables covered with fish. The same coarse wool that made my souvenir doll now

appeared in more muted colors, as nubby brown, grey and black shawls, hats, socks and blankets.

But what in heck were those dried brown and red lumps strung on long cords, the green bricks, the long white stalks and the leathery, mud-colored blocks? I've said yes to some strange meals in my time – grilled warthog and seal oil-ice cream among them – but this food could have passed for expired army field rations. But no, they were local favorites: smoked, dried sea squirts; two kinds of smoked mussels; stems from the nalca plant, the giant Chilean rhubarb; “bricks” of dried seaweed; and dried bull kelp leaves, folded into squares and tied together with, uhhhh, rubber bands? “No, those are kelp stems,” said Guridi. “People here stick to the old way of doing things. Nothin’ is wasted, not even seaweed. If you wanted to survive on this island, you had to be ingenious.”

Chiloe isn't that far from the mainland; you can see it from the hotel. But the island is more than two thirds of the way down the Chilean coast, a region long controlled by fierce Mapuche tribes living south of the Bio Bio River. After the Spanish conquistadores conquered Peru, in the 16th century, they marched into what is now Chile, expecting to extend their rule. But the battle-tested Mapuche warriors stopped them at the river, killing or driving out most of the intruders. The exception was a small band Spanish and Huiliche Indians who escaped and crossed over to Chiloe.

Isolated, the new arrivals mixed, blended their skills and created today's population, descendants of the early mestizo group and more recent arrivals. The only outsiders to arrive in those early days were a group of Jesuit priests who traveling from island to island, encouraging the new converts to build churches, of which 15 are now World Heritage Sites. Constructed entirely of wood, without stone or nails, they are Chiloe's most visited attraction.

The Jesuits, missionaries from a half-dozen different European countries, weren't architects but they remembered the churches they had left behind – Romanesque, gothic, baroque, neoclassic – well enough to produce sketches. Which is one reason why none of the churches are exactly alike. “The Jesuits knew what a church should look like, but they didn't know how to build one,” said Carlos Miranda, a guide at the Tierra Chiloe Hotel, who leads cultural tours. “What the people knew how to build was boats,” he said, escorting us to the church in Rilan to look at the finely-crafted ceiling, built, he said, “exactly like an upside-down boat.”

Chiloe's other signature buildings are the “palafitos,” rainbow-colored wood houses built on stilts out over Castro's bay, probably designed to accommodate seasonal 23-foot-high tides. The same tidal variation supports Chiloe's broad estuaries, wetlands and mudflats, creating – surprise! – a top-rated birding destinations. Resident and migrant birds include Magellanic and Humboldt penguins, Chilean skua, parasitic jaeger, Buller's albatross, kelp goose, cinnamon teal, black-necked swans and Chilean Flamingoes.

Equally surprising was finding that Chiloe's roller-coaster roads and steep hills aren't a coastal range but moraines left by the last ice age, which entombed everything but a narrow band on the west coast. That strip, now preserved as Chiloe National Park, is home to a tangled forest of pre-Ice Age species, including the Giant Chiloean rhubarb sold in the market, a plant so big and healthy it looks carnivorous. Giving it a wide berth, we toured the interpretive center at the park's south entrance where many of the island's strangest residents, both flora and fauna, are on display. No woolly mammoths here, but the forest was so thick and the ground cover so wet and spongy that most of the park is inaccessible. If it hadn't been for the mile-long boardwalk that loops through and around the forest, we would never have known about the ice, nor the nalca plant, nor the roller coaster roads. All catnip for the curious traveler, and a reason to come back for more.

QUICK GUIDE TO CHILOE: Chiloe is a four-season destination. Autumn (March to May) has mild temperatures and off-season rates. Rain falls occasionally; it snows in winter.

LODGING: Hotels, inns and B&Bs are available in most price categories; see www.turismochile.travel. For a fine cuisine and rustic luxury, try the popular Hotel Parque Quilquico (www.hpq.cl). The Tierra Chiloe (www.tierrachiloe.com) provides contemporary luxury in a minimalist setting. Both have excellent ocean views, fine cuisine and room rates with or without meals. Also available are spa services, swimming pool, fitness equipment, guided tours and outdoor recreation and airport transfers.

FLYING THERE: The shortest total airline flights are on LAN from the U.S. to Santiago, with a single stop in Lima, Peru. Other airlines and flight combinations also fly to Santiago, but with more stops and /or longer airport waits.



Panoramic windows in the Quilquico Hotel look out at Dalcachue Channel, Quinchao Island and Pullao Wetland, Chiloe, Chile.



The Church of San Francisco, like most Chiloe churches, are entirely wood, built by shipbuilders, Chiloe, Chile