



The Trans-Andes Highway: Santiago/Mendoza/Valparaiso

20 October 2007

An Intercity Rental Car Tour

Not all of the urban tours by rental car have been completed by rental car. This is principally because tourists are generally not allowed to rent cars in China, which has necessitated the use of taxis.¹ This is the first urban tour by rental car that is not urban, though it is by rental car.

The Trans-Andean highway between Valparaiso/Santiago de Chile and Mendoza, Argentina is one of the world's great drives. Separate rental car tours are being prepared for Santiago de Chile, Valparaiso and Mendoza. But the uniqueness of the scenery along the Trans-Andean highway and the importance of the route justify this intercity rental car tour.

This tour recounts a trip made from Santiago de Chile to Mendoza on 13 October 2007; then from Mendoza to Portillo, Chile on 14 October 2007, and finally a return through Santiago de Chile to Valparaiso on 15 October.

On the trip to Mendoza, I had the pleasure of the company of my colleague Professor Jean-Claude Ziv and Claire Bennoit, with whom I had attended a seminar in Santiago. Professor Ziv is Chaire of Logistics, Transport and Tourism at the Conservatoire National des Arts et Metiers in Paris. Jean-Claude and Claire demonstrated their rental car traveling credentials by taking the trip solely for the purpose of seeing the highway and the scenery. They were on a plane back to Santiago from Mendoza 12 hours after we left the Chilean capital. At the last minute we realized that there had been a change of time zone and there was little extra time at the airport. Fortunately the connection was made with a few minutes to spare.

Santiago and Mendoza are approximately 220 miles (350 kilometers) apart by road and 150 miles (250 kilometers) by air.

The Andes is really two mountain ranges, the Cordillera Occidental and the Cordillera Oriental. In Chile, the Cordillera Oriental is the range normally thought of as the Andes. This range includes the

¹ In 2001, a car was rented in Shanghai, though attempts since that time have been unsuccessful. Other mainland China rental car tours have been by taxi.

highest mountain outside Asia (Cerro Aconcagua) and is probably the most extensive highland outside the ranges that separate India, Nepal and Pakistan from China (principally the Himalayas). Most of the slides in this article relate to the Cordillera Oriental, however, the last three (Slides 118-120) are of the Cordillera Occidental, which is better known as the Coast Range in Chile. This range separates Santiago, Chile's largest urban area, from Valparaiso, the second largest.

The Route and the Road

The trip begins on National Route 57, a toll road (Slide 115),² from Santiago to the Los Andes area, where a bypass provides a connection to Route 60, as the Trans-Andean route is known in Chile. The border is crossed by the Cristo Redentor tunnel, at 9,800 feet elevation (3,200 meters). The tunnel is nearly two miles (3,000 meters) long. The tunnel was completed in the early 1980s. Before that, the route ran over the crest of the Andes, reaching 12,000 feet (3,900 meters).

In Argentina, the highway is National Route 7, which continues through Mendoza to Buenos Aires. The entire route from Los Andes to Mendoza is a part of the Pan American Highway.

The road is generally two lanes, with one lane in each direction. At points there is a third lane for passing. The length of passing lane is greater in Argentina than in Chile. The last 15 miles (25 kilometers) into Mendoza is a four to six lane freeway.

The route in Chile is far steeper than the Argentine side. In the last few miles before Portillo, near Cristo Redentor Tunnel, there are 29 switchback curves (Slides 99-106). There are two sections of curves, with a short fairly straight roadway between them. The first segments include 18 switchbacks and the second segment has 11 curves. The switchbacks begin and end at a bridge over the highway of the disused Trans-Andean Railway (Slide 99).

The actual driving time is no more than five hours, even with the truck traffic. However, this is considerably lengthened by border crossings and inspection stations. The eastbound trip was at the beginning of a holiday weekend, and the final entry into Argentina required a wait of three hours at the combined Chilean-Argentine customs station on the east side of Cristo Redentor Tunnel (Slides 17 & 94). The return was at an off-peak period, and there was little traffic at the joint run entry to Chile, just west of Cristo Redentor Tunnel. Nonetheless, the formalities required 50 minutes.

On the return trip, I took a room at the Portillo Hotel (Slide 95) at the Portillo ski resort (Slide 14, 15, 33, 96 - 98) which at off-peak season was only US\$59. Further, the food and atmosphere is superb. The only problem was a four inch (10 centimeter) snowstorm that hit about 18:00. Fortunately the snow stopped by 10 pm and the road was open the next morning. Snowstorms on this road have been known to strand people for days. I had planned to get an early start, by 06:00, however delayed my departure, since the most treacherous part of the trip is the switchbacks that literally begin at Portillo.

At 08:00, I learned that the road was open, however the surface looked treacherous and there was literally no traffic. By 11:00, with the sun shining, the snow and ice had melted, even though the temperature remained slightly below freezing.

² As of the date of travel, the toll was 2,100 Chilean Pesos, slightly more than US\$4.00.

Scenery

As would be expected, the scenery is spectacular. The snow capped, rugged mountains are in view much of the time. The Portillo Hotel, at Portillo, stands in front of a magnificent alpine lake somewhat reminiscent of Lake Louise in Alberta's Canadian Rockies.

Perhaps the highlight of the trip is the brief view of Cerro Aconcagua, the highest mountain in the southern hemisphere and the highest mountain outside Asia (Slides 15, 82, 83). This peak reaches 22,841 feet (6,962 meters). The peak is approximately 10 miles from the highway (16 kilometers). Regrettably, at both passings, the top of the peak was obscured by clouds.³

A long "u-shaped" valley comes into view immediately outside the east exit of Cristo Redentor Tunnel. During this part of the trip and continuing at least to the town of Uspallata, the abandoned Trans-Andean railway is in view much of the time.

The Rio Mendoza, especially from Puente del Inca down to Uspallata, presents unusual scenery. This modest river (which doubtless becomes a torrent during some parts of the year) has steep, very high banks, which appear to be far larger than could have been created even in a flood. The banks continue for more than 30 miles. During the last few miles, the high banks are only on the south side of the river (Slides 35-38, 40, 66, 67, 69, 71-73).

Finally, the last leg of the trip, through the Region Metropolitana (Santiago) and on to Valparaiso was all on high quality tollway, with spring flowers along the way (Slides 113-116).

Trans-Andean Railway

All along the route is the Trans-Andean railway, a narrow (meter) gauge railway closed in the early 1980s. There are a number of railway bridges which appear to be in generally good shape, however the roadbed and the railway snowsheds are in a bad state of repair. There is a parallel rail tunnel at Cristo Redentor. Chile and Argentina plan to refurbish the railway and open it by 2010, however there is no indication of any preparatory work at this point, which suggests, at a minimum, that the railway will open later than planned (Slides 22, 31, 37, 48, 81, 90, 91, 99).

Slides:

The Slides are divided into the following segments:

- From Santiago to Mendoza (Slides 1-53)
 - Santiago to Cristo Redentor Tunnel (2-17)
 - Cristo Redentor Tunnel to Mendoza (18-52)

- From Mendoza to Valparaiso (Slides 54-114)
 - Mendoza to Cristo Redentor Tunnel (55-94)
 - Cristo Redentor Tunnel to Valparaiso (95-120)
 - Cordillera Occidental (118-120)

³ An unobstructed view of Cerro Aconcagua from the same location is at <http://www.jakejonnnes.com/aconcagua.jpg>.

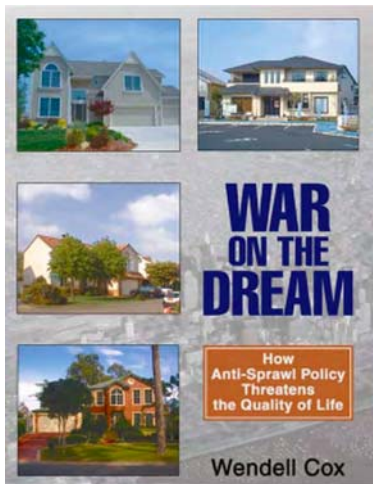
Related *Rental Car Tours*

Rental Car Tour of Santiago (<http://www.rentalcartours.net/rac-santiago.pdf>)

Rental Car Tour of Valparaiso (<http://www.rentalcartours.net/rac-valparaiso.pdf>).

Rental Car Tour of Mendoza (<http://www.rentalcartours.net/rac-mendoza.pdf>).

*Masthead superimposed on a map of
Centro in Belo Horizonte, Brazil*



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Urban Tours by Rental Car: About the Series

Urban Tours by Rental Car offers perspectives on urban development obtained by automobile tours through urban areas. Rental cars are not the favored method for visiting cities, especially those outside one's own country. Instead, tourists and urban planners favor packaged tours or local public transport systems. Both are splendid ways for seeing the city as it used to be --- the very reason for most tourist visits. The historical core areas contain monuments, prime government and religious edifices and quaint neighborhoods that are often centuries old. This is particularly important to tourists from the newer urban areas of the American, Canadian or Australian West, where history extends not far before World War II. It is further understandable that few tourists travel thousands of miles to see the newer suburban areas that look very much like home. But most tourists do not profess to be students of the urban area.

For the urban planner interested in understanding the whole urban area, it is not enough to study the core alone, regardless of its architectural attractiveness, romanticism, history or affirmation of an individually preferred life style. No one, regardless of the depth of their education can develop reliable conceptions from an unrepresentative sample, and urban cores are the very essence of unrepresentative samples. Both public transport and packaged tours miss the larger part --- the expanse of sprawling residential and business development that rings virtually all major urban areas. They may be of little interest to many urban planners, but they should be.

Stripping away regional architectural facades, one might as well be in the suburbs of Phoenix, Portland, Perth or Paris. Here, the automobile is king, because no public transport system has been developed that can effectively serve destinations outside the core (at least at a price any society can afford). While public transport market shares are higher in European suburban areas than in the New World, much of the difference is attributable to lower incomes and less automobile access. Indeed, public transport's principal weakness, lack of automobile competitiveness, is itself a contributing factor to the rising motorization occurring from the suburbs of Copenhagen and Nagoya to the suburbs of Lagos and Mumbai. To oversimplify this phenomenon as being a "love affair with the automobile" is the equivalent of saying that Singaporeans or Brazilians have a love affair with air conditioning. Human beings prefer comfort to discomfort and they prefer free time to time over which they have no control.

It is no wonder that tourists return to the United States thinking that all Paris looks like the second arrondissement (less than one percent does) and that urban planners think all of Milan looks like the architectural treasures that surround the Cathedral. In fact, the sprawling suburbs of Europe, Japan, Canada and Connecticut resemble one another in many ways. For any seeking to study the urban area in its entirety -- - not just the favored haunts of core-dwelling elites --- there is no alternative to "getting behind the wheel." Thus, *Urban Tours by Rental Car*.



From Santiago To Mendoza

Slide 1



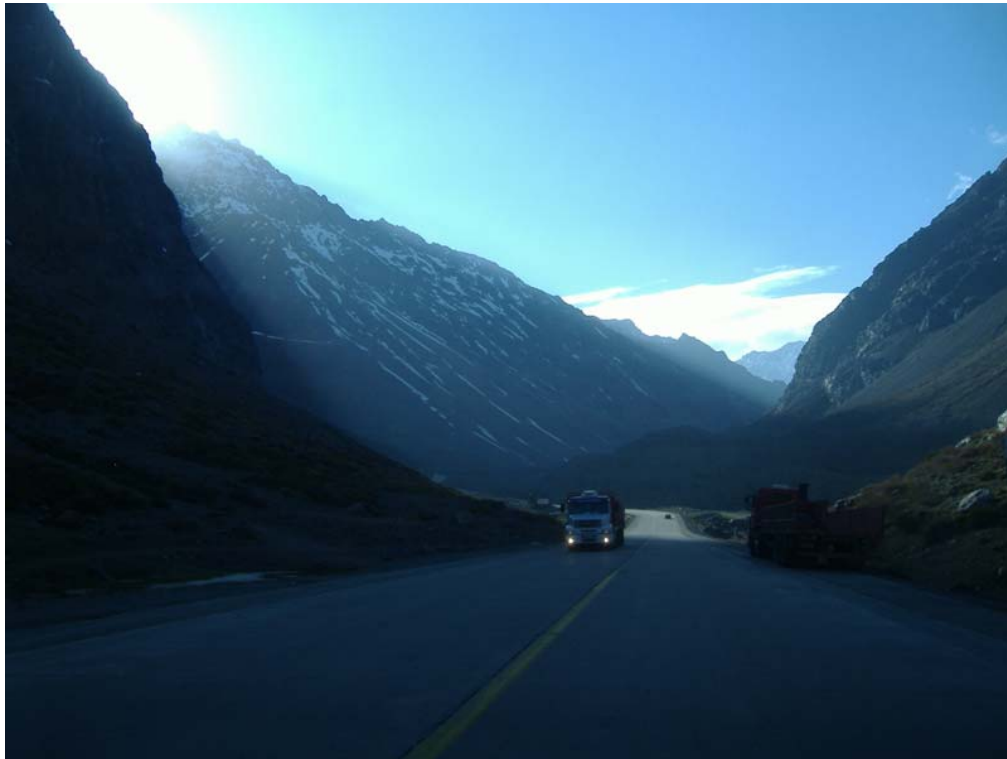
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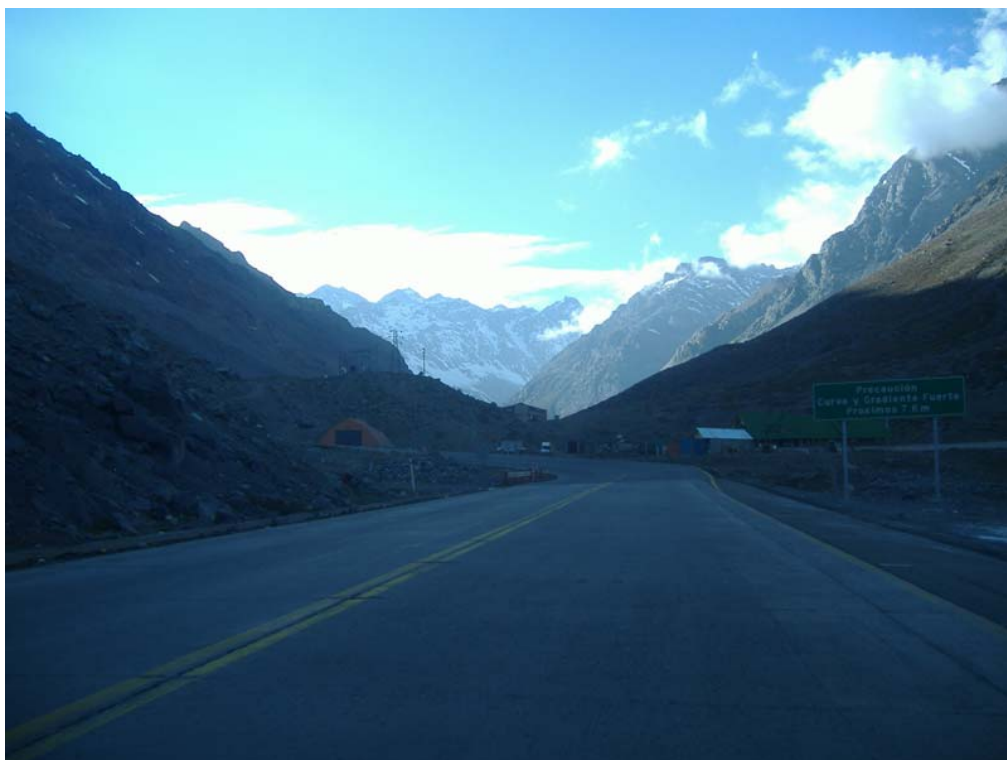
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Slide 4



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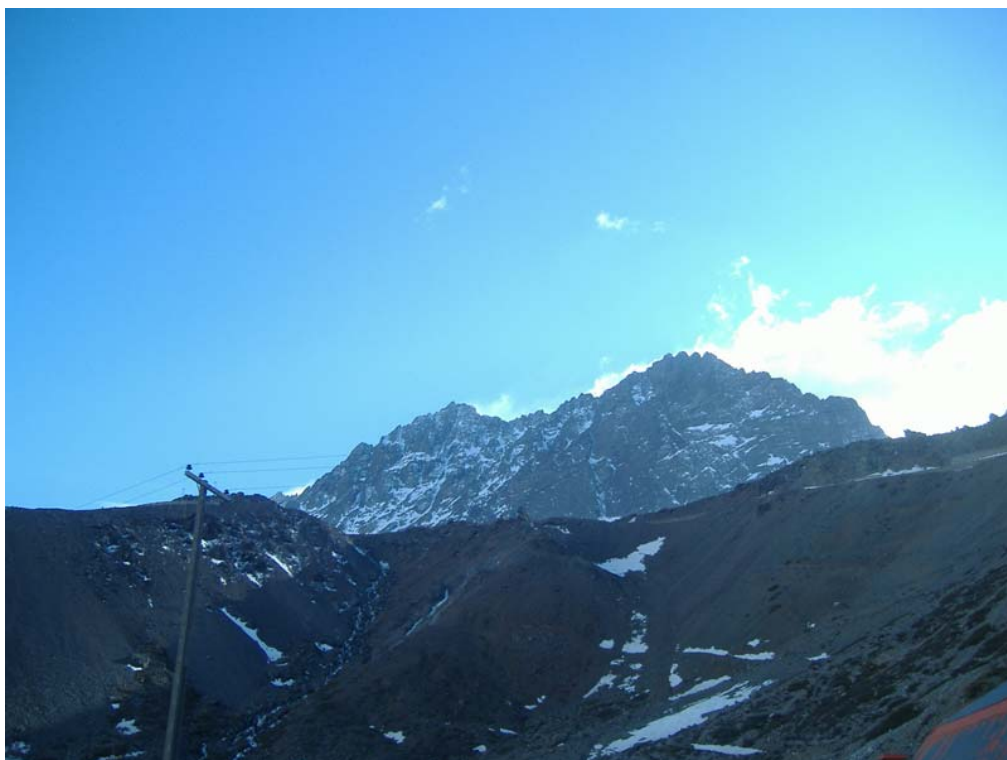
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From Mendoza to Valparaiso

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Aconcagua

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Aconcagua: For cloudless view from same point: See
<http://www.horizonsunlimited.com/tstories/zwick/images/Aconcagua.jpg>

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Sight Line to Aconcagua (10 Miles/16 Kilometers)

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