

# Chile – people, culture, language

## A guide for businesses



### The country

The longest country in the world, Chile stretches over 2,700 miles (4,300 km) along the southwestern coast of South America - a distance roughly the same as that from San Francisco to New York, or Edinburgh to Baghdad. At the same time, its width never exceeds 150 miles (240 km), making the country more than eighteen times longer than its widest point.

Chile's natural landscape is as breathtaking as it is varied: from salt lakes and the world's driest desert in the north, to glaciers in the south, taking in geysers, mountains, beaches, forests and volcanoes in between. Punta Arenas, on Chile's southern tip, is the southernmost city in the world.

The turbulent political times of the latter third of the twentieth century have given way to a more stable system, both political and economic, and Chile's economy is now growing at a rate of around 4-5%. In the 2006 presidential elections, Michelle Bachelet became Chile's first female chief of state.



Santiago's Financial District

### Did you know...?

- The name Chile may come from a Peruvian Indian word that means "snow," or from an Inca word that means "land's end."
- The largest earthquake ever recorded (magnitude 9.5) was off the coast of Chile in 1960. It caused a tsunami that killed approximately 2,000 people in Chile, 61 people 15 hours later in Hawaii, and 122 people 22 hours later in Japan.
- Chile claims to be the only country to exist on three continents.
- Slapping your right fist into your left open palm is an obscene gesture. Similarly an open palm with fingers separated means "stupid".

### Fast facts

**Location:** Southern South America, bordering the South Pacific Ocean, between Argentina and Peru.

**Capital:** Santiago

**Official Language(s):** Spanish

**Population:** 15 million

**Ethnic Groups:** 95% white and white-Amerindian, 3% Amerindian, 2% other

**Religion(s):** Roman Catholic 89%, Protestant 11%

**Currency:** Peso

**Dialling Code:** +56

**Time:** -4 hours GMT

### Language

**Talking the talk:** the positive impression you will make by speaking a few basic Spanish phrases cannot be overestimated. Below are some commonly-used words and phrases:

English	Spanish	Pronunciation
Hello	Hola	o-la
Good day/good morning	Buenos días	<i>bwe-nos dee-ass</i>
Good afternoon	Buenas tardes	<i>bwe-nas tar-des</i>
Good evening	Buenas noches	<i>bwe-nas no-ches</i>
Goodbye	Adiós	<i>a-dyos</i>
How are you?	Qué tal?	<i>Ke tal?</i>
Fine, and you?	Bien, y usted?	<i>B-yen, ee oos-teth?</i>
Pleased to meet you	Mucho gusto	<i>moo-cho goos-to</i>
Yes	Sí	see
No	No	no
Please	Por favor	<i>por fa-vor</i>
Thank you	Gracias	<i>gra-syas</i>

## Meeting and greeting

- Men will usually shake hands. Women generally pat each other on the right forearm or shoulder.
- Between friends and family things will relax and become more unreserved – men may embrace and energetically pat each other on the back whilst women will kiss once on the right cheek. Always let your Chilean counterpart progress to this stage of formality.
- Like many South Americans, Chileans use both their maternal and paternal surnames. The father's surname is listed first and is the one used in conversation.
- If you know of any titles (Doctor - "Doctor"; Engineer - "Ingeniero"; Teacher - "Profesor"; Architect - "Arquitecto"; Lawyer - "Abogado"), always try to use them. If no title exists then simply use "Señor" (male) or "Señora" (female) followed by the surname.
- Older people with whom you have a personal relationship are commonly addressed as "doñ" (male) or "doña" (female) with their first name.
- First names are used between close friends - wait until invited to move to a first name basis.

## Business is personal

- Chile is a relationship-driven culture, so it is important to build solid personal relationships with long-term objectives.
- Chileans want to do business with people they know and trust. As a result it is necessary to obtain third party introductions in Chile. This can be achieved through consultancies or banks.
- Building rapport is crucial and fundamentally comes down to spending time getting to know one another. One should try and have at least a basic background of Chile prior to visiting.
- Good topics of conversation are:
  - The landscape/geography of Chile
  - Sports – football, polo, skiing and fishing are popular
  - Food and wine
  - Family
- Topics to avoid are:
  - Politics
  - Religion
  - Relations with neighbouring nations
  - The class system
- Always remember that interpersonal skills such as the ability to "fit in" and maintain good relations with the group are sometimes considered more important than professional competence and experience.
- Once you form good relationships you join a network where favours can be asked and reciprocated. "Pitutos" is the term given to those with insider status that can get things done for you.

## Communication style

- Chileans are generally indirect in their communication styles, but can become very animated and assertive when/if they get emotional.
- Personal honour is very important; refrain from publicly criticising or patronising others and doing anything else that might create embarrassment.
- Communication styles tend to be tuned to people's feelings; so once trust is established people may be more direct as there is less chance of causing offence.
- Confrontation is generally avoided in order not to jeopardize another's honour or dignity – it may therefore be necessary to read between the lines in order to fully understand what is really meant.
- It is common to interrupt someone while they are speaking.

## Business meetings

- Initial meetings should be used to build a relationship and establish trust.
- An initial visit should be made by an upper-level executive, accompanied by mid-level executives. Mid-level executives can then attend subsequent visits to conduct negotiations that go into greater depth.
- Meetings are not always linear in their progression. Schedules are not very structured and issues can be tackled all at the same time. It is important to be patient as time is not of the essence in Chile – meetings will last as long as they need to last.
- Remember that decisions are not made at meetings so it is important to provide all necessary information during the meeting. Using the "hard-sell" or other aggressive tactics will not go down well. Instead, specify your priorities, terms, and conditions.
- Dressing well is a sign of respect for your counterpart. Standard suits (black, blue or grey) along with a shirt and tie are the norm. Women should stick with blue or grey business suits and shoes with low heels. The "business casual" look is a no-no; also avoid "flashy", statement making items of clothing or accessories. Rather than marking you as a success it would be interpreted as vain and self-absorbed.
- January and February are summer in Chile so most people are on holiday.



*World Biosphere Reserve Torres del Paine, with its granite peaks, pristine lakes and massive glaciers.*

## Further resources

The British Chilean Chamber of Commerce [www.britcham.cl](http://www.britcham.cl) [www.bccc.org.uk](http://www.bccc.org.uk)  
Embassy of Chile, UK [www.prochile.co.uk](http://www.prochile.co.uk)  
Business CHILE [www.businesschile.cl](http://www.businesschile.cl)  
Latin Trade Online [www.latintrade.com](http://www.latintrade.com)  
The Economist [www.economist.com/countries/Chile/](http://www.economist.com/countries/Chile/)

Regional Language Network West Midlands

Tel: 0121 329 3297  
Email: [info@rln-westmidlands.com](mailto:info@rln-westmidlands.com)  
Website: [www.rln-westmidlands.com](http://www.rln-westmidlands.com)



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