

GUIDE TO VOLUNTEERING FOR WILD CHINCHILLA CONSERVATION WORK IN CHILE!

Welcome to the land of the chinchillas!!! I am pleased you will be visiting us. My first trip to Chile was thrilling and I hope you are as impressed and empowered by your visit. You are one of the many people who will be working on this project. Currently, the project's focus is habitat restoration for chinchillas. That means that the work involves mainly growing plants in a plant nursery and planting seedlings in the mountains.

Below, I have included lists of information to aid you from passports to clothing. Much of this information came from a similar guide (probably written by Drs. Katie Sieving and Mary Willson for Senda Darwin). Also, if you are interested in working on other wildlife projects in Chile, we suggest you visit the Senda Darwin homepage or contact Dr. J. Jimenez at the Universidad de Los Lagos.

Passport- valid!

All USA citizens need is a valid passport. Check with the Chilean consulates in your respective countries. A volunteer was delayed in Miami for a day because she brought her old passport to the airport! Her family came on ahead and spent an extra day in Santiago. This was costly!

Vaccinations (check and see what your Embassy recommends)

In the past these were suggested:

Hepatitis A

Polio booster

Typhoid immunization –three weeks before traveling

Tetanus booster

Money

ATM cards provide the best exchange rates. There are many ATM machines in Illapel (one at the COPEC gas station at the southern most intersection into town, the bank is on the Avenue, and the pharmacy Cruz Verde. Traveler's checks and credit cards are **not** accepted in most of the stores in Illapel (closest town to Aucó), and exchanging US dollars is almost impossible but find the Mormon missionaries and they may be able to help. You can exchange dollars at the Santiago airport. In Illapel, expect to pay only with cash (Chilean Pesos/CLP).

Costs

We do not charge people to come and work for us, and we cannot afford to pay volunteers either. The only people paid for their work are the local people that we hire to help when we need it. They receive the going daily rate for the area. You will need to pay for your bus (approx. 4000 CLP) from Santiago to Illapel. Once in Illapel, from a phone center or a booth call our cell phone and if possible, someone will come and get you. If you arrive during the day be prepared to wait in the bus station or take a taxi (approx. 2500-3000 CLP) to the house in El Balcón.

You will need cash to buy personal items and anything that you may want to do or spend on - eat out, visit parks, email, public pools. The town is very small (three traffic signals) and there is not much to spend money on besides bars and food. If you don't like to walk, you have to pay for colectivos in town (250-400 CLP).

Protected areas

If you choose to visit the National Chinchilla Reserve it cost about US\$3.00 for a day and USD\$15.00 for a night in their cabins. They have a very nice hike and educational center. The reserve is located in the middle of the study area. The chinchilla population is protected in their national reserve that covers about 4500 ha. We (Save the Wild Chinchillas Inc. with the local community) have been negotiating for the creation of a private park.

Food

Food is reasonable and restaurants are inexpensive. A kilo of bread is about US\$1.75. For two people we spend about US\$50.00 a month on vegetarian food. We would like to be able to feed volunteers, but we have very limited funding and none to cover the cost of food.

Copies

Make copies of your passport, credit cards, driver's license and insurance cards. Keep these in a safe place not with the originals. This is just in case you lose the originals.

Driving permits

In the USA, international Drivers Licenses are available at AAA, good for one year and cost US\$20. Check with the Chilean consulates in your respective countries.

Health insurance

We strongly recommend that you get a good health insurance policy before working with us. Some insurance will pay for your transportation to your country in case of a health emergency. There is a hospital in Illapel with basic facilities. Better hospitals are about 3 hours further south in Viña del Mar or 5 hours south in Santiago.

Santiago de Chile airport procedures

Upon entering Chile, at the airport, citizens of the USA will be required to pay a one-time per passport entrance fee (Approx. US\$100.00). Citizen of other countries please check with your respective Chilean consulates. Do not panic - many people around here speak English and are most willing to assist. At the counter pass your passport and the paper you filled out on the airplane. Tell them you are here for vacation. This applies to all people visiting for less than 90 days. For stays more than 90 days, there are two choices.

1. Obtain a visa before you leave your country - not very complicated, but lots of paper work.
2. The easier solution is to visit Argentina when you stay in Chile approaches 90 days. Argentina will stamp your passport and then you may return to Chile for 90 more days.

Source: http://mapasdechile.com/rutas_sector04/index.htm

If needed, someone from SWC can meet you at the airport. This is only if absolutely needed. Travel to the airport and back takes a day by bus. In the airport, we stand on the stairs that overhangs the baggage claim area. We can talk (shout) to you; however, we will not have contact with you directly until you make it through customs with your bags. For those of you that have problems in the customs area, tell the person that your friend is waiting at the sliding glass doors and maybe able to help with translations. If you are bringing scientific equipment, traps, cages, GPS units etc., customs process can last for a couple of hours. We request you not to bring unnecessary items that may get stuck at the customs. **Do not** bring any seeds, grains or seed bearing fruits. It won't make it through customs.

You can take a bus from the airport to one block from the North Bus Station in Santiago. Tell the driver you need the **Estación de Bus Norte**. Then go to the terminals and look for the schedules to Illapel. Also, you can take any bus that will be going further north than Los Vilos. Buy a ticket. When you go to enter the bus, they will take your bags place them under the bus and give you a little baggage receipt. **Do not lose this**. You need it to get your bags from the bus conductor when you leave the bus. *If you lose it, make sure your bags still have nametags from the airplane trip that mach your passport. You can show them your passport and the nametags match.* When the bus reaches Los Vilos, tell the conductor you need the ESSO or Shell station. Here you will get colectivos or taxis to Illapel during the daylight hours. They are all yellow cars. Beware; colectivo services from Los Vilos to Illapel stop by about 8 pm.

Housing

The field station in Aucó is a wooden cabin 6 x 3 meters with a roof. A small two burner gas stove, an old teakettle, other misc. kitchen wear, candles, odd field equipment are available in the cabin. A small stream outside provides water. Bring a water filter pump, if you like. **No fires** will be permitted in the field at anytime. The area is very dry and a fire could be disastrous to the ecosystem. Also, there is a wooden covered hole for a bathroom, and a shower stall.

Work clothes

- **A Hat** - one that provides lots of shade, many cheap ones available for sale Illapel (the Kodak store on Constitución or the street market every Monday, Thursday and Saturday morning on the street that runs parallel to Independencia, one block uphill).
- Medium weight (light colored) **slacks** or jeans (blue jeans seem too heavy for me). Your pants will protect you from many thorny cacti.
- Old long sleeve cotton dress **shirts** (these will protect you from the sun and the thorns to some extent).
- **Shoes/Boots** Find the shoes that have the most traction capability. The terrain is very steep, sandy, rocky and difficult! Make sure your boots have been broken in. There will be lots of walking, and you do not want blisters.
- **Book bag** - bring one that is comfortable for carrying for a daylong hike that can hold a 1.5-liter water bottle (we have the bottles!).
- **Knee-high** socks - you will want to tuck your pants into your socks.
- **Sweat suit** at night it gets cold and these are the most comfortable in my opinion, also use for the *long* plane, bus and car trips.
- **No nice clothes** they are not needed and will just be dragged around for no reason.

Bedding

We have some blankets but bring a sleeping bag. We will provide you with a mattress and a small pillow depending on availability.

Bathroom

When in Aucó, please only go to the bathroom in the hole. If you need to urinate while in the field, please do so down slope and far from water sources and do not leave your paper on the ground. Also, many places have bathrooms in Illapel but they usually do not have paper. It helps if you keep *toilet paper in your pocket*.

Educational Facilities

Library A small but complete library mostly in English is available for serious researchers. All books, journals, etc. must be signed out and returned before you leave. Most titles over these topics: chinchillas, mammals, geography, primates, plants and conservation. A few titles have been contributed to the collections that are enjoyment readings (from Anne Rice to locally written poetry).

Computer A GIS, Remote Sensing computer system complete with ArcView and Idrisi will aid those with geographic interest. The versions are old, but effective for our work. The system has a color tabloid printer and Windows NT operating system, Office 2000 etc. Remember that toner is very expensive and is not supplied at this time. The computer is not plugged in as it sometimes causes the lights to be short-circuited. Please unplug it after your use.

Field equipment Over the last decade, I have acquired most the items needed to conduct wildlife studies. These include: Ropes, Compasses, Flagging, Night vision binoculars, GPS systems and Smoke cards. Please contact me before you come if you need to know about specific equipment availability. The night vision binoculars will be damaged if exposed to any light source (even car lights). Also, please try not to damage or

lose the equipment – they cost a lot. Note: sometimes stuff gets lost and that is just life. Just let us know what has been lost. Most of the gear is not stored at the station. Some is in the USA. Check with us for availability.

Living norms

No fires will be permitted in the field to cook at anytime. The area is very dry and a fire could be disastrous to the ecosystem. Conservation of all resources is required. All dish and laundry water is placed outside to provide plants water. I ask that you don't cook/eat meat while at the station. If you want meat, it is recommended to visit many of the fine restaurants in Illapel (these close at 6 pm on Sundays). I recommend the resort on the mountain across the river from Illapel. The weekend night chef is Miguel – the best in town!

Communication

To make calls you must visit the town or have a cell phone. There is no coverage by any carrier at the station. However, at the intersection of Aucó in the reserve there is coverage. Email is available in many locations in town. Many phone stores are also located in Illapel. If someone sends you mail, we will get your mail to you. Mailing address is:

Your name
C/o Amy Deane
El Balcón, Parcela 65
Illapel, IV Region
Chile

Transportation

A very good bus system will take you almost anywhere in Chile. However, none of these pass the field station. To get to the field station in Aucó from Illapel, walk to the center of town and take either 46 or 74 colectivo lines to Asiento Viejo. These cost from 300 to 500 CLP depending upon day and time of week. Sunday and holidays: 500, Weekdays: 300 and nights: 400. From Asiento Viejo, we hitchhike (no solo attempts) to as close as possible to the Aucó sites. If you tell the truck driver you want Chillan (pronounced: Chi-yon) or Quebrada Cuyano he will either take you or tell you that he is going to another place. If you do not speak Spanish, tell the driver that you want the (Amy, GRINGA de las Chinchillas). They will get you to as close to the work site as possible. The town is small and most everyone that passes the road going north out of town knows where you want to go as long as you can manage to communicate that you need to find me. A huge mining truck passes the station 4 times per week. It makes two round trips to the mine further up the basin in Cuyano two times per week. Many other mining trucks pass within two kilometers of the field station from early morning until about 12:20 in the afternoon. Also, a MICRO (mini-bus) passes between Illapel and Quebrada Cuyano (work site) on most Mondays but not holidays. Check with the neighbor for the schedule. It depends upon season. Also, the cost is about 1500 CLP.

Weather

This is a mountain desert. Morning, evening and nights are cold. Days are hot. The wet season lasts between May and August and can cause much rainfall. Raingear is needed for those visiting in these months.

Dangers

There are really only a couple of dangers all related to working in the mountains. The terrain is steep and I fall on a regular basis. Unfortunately, there are many cacti and these can cause momentary stinging. Be careful and make sure that you first foot is secure before lifting the next. Many of the rocks have endured frost freeze action and although appearing whole are actually split. Usually I fall because the top half of a rock slips under my weight. Try not to walk on the rocks. Not only do chinchillas live under the big ones but also iguanas and other lizards sleep under the smaller ones. First aid supplies are located in the station in the closet. Many poisonous bugs and scorpions are found here! Do not play with any of them! The one bug of concern is the *vinchuca* and it lives in colonies in many of the same locations of chinchillas. These animals detect heat and that is how they know where you are located. Keep moving and do not sit or stand still on mountain slopes that have lots of rocks. It is not their

bite that is the problem. It is that when you scratch the bite you transfer the feces left from where they walked on you into the bite hole. This can cause CHAGUS, a painful disease that affects one later in life. If you feel like you've been bitten by a bug, **do not scratch!** You can wash the bite area with soap and a local doctor tells me that will suffice. However, go to the hospital. Not all the vinchuca carry the parasite (*Trypanosoma*). Usually, the ones with red, orange or yellow markings are most likely to carry the disease. It scares me every time I see them. I usually see them in the late afternoon.

Four different spiders in this area can potentially cause death - the black widow is one of them. If bit, go to the hospital **as soon as possible!** They have the cure but you must get there within 24 hours. Also, the stick bug I am told if bites you can kill you. I have no idea if this is true. Also, the caterpillars have stinging barbs. Also, a small snake is poisonous. However, it is very difficult for the little guys to bite you they have very small mouths. However, the hospital has the cure. Foxes and bats may carry rabies. Do not play with them or enter any old mining shafts. You can get ill from inhaling the air in the shafts where bats roost. Finally, pumas are located in the study area. If you see one, go another direction. Do not run. Raise your arms above your head as to appear larger. If you yell and clap your hands the pumas get scared and leave. Local people report that pumas here are very afraid of people. I have never seen one but I have seen their impressive footprints near water sources and in the road right outside of the nursery. For most of the year (the dry hot season) they are higher in the Andes. Two are resident year round in Q. Cuyano. One has been making daily or nightly passes along that road just outside of the station's fence. Please read the book, Mountain Lion Alert by Steven Torres before visiting.

Our Typical Day

A typical day starts at whatever time is the earliest possible to get on the road. This varies daily and depends upon too many variables to state. However, if it is decided the night before, we would like all people to be up and ready to go at the designated time. We work until lunch. We usually share food items - it's one of those bonding things. Lunch is usually eaten under the pear tree at the nursery. Lunch lasts until someone starts working and we work as late as possible. Sometimes we watch the wild chinchillas at night. That means getting to the study site 45 minutes to an hour before dark and setting up the equipment. We stay out until it's too cold or the next morning comes. We spend a lot of time laughing at each other and ourselves. Everyday is different and we see a lot of wildlife. We are pretty simple.

More specifics about getting here

To come here, you will have to fly to Santiago de Chile (airport code: SCL). LanChile, Lufthansa etc. fly in from Europe. United, Delta, LanChile, Avianca etc. fly from the United States. I don't know what the current fares are. It should be around \$1000 (USD) round-trip per person.

Once you get to the airport, you can take TURBUS or the Minivan-taxi (there are ticket-counters in the airport) to the bus station for the NORTH (Bus estación norte; there is a different one for the south). TURBUS (approx. 2000 CLP from the airport) will take you to the south station, but if you don't have much luggage, you can ask the driver to stop as close as possible to the north station and walk (about a block or two) from there. The minivan-taxi (approx. 3200 CLP from the airport) will comfortably take you all the way to the north station. Be alert in Santiago. It is a big city, and has all the elements of one. At the bus station, you will have to buy a ticket to Illapel (pronounced eeyapel) on either PULLMAN or TURBUS. It will take 5-6 hours on the bus (along the pacific coast and then into the mountains after Los Vilos), but the buses are pretty comfortable.

Be responsible, stay safe, and enjoy your stay.