

DARWIN NERUDA AND ME

Aleszu Bajak wanders through the hills above Valparaíso, Chile, accompanied by the ghosts of the city's most eloquent heralds

I SNUCK INTO VALPARAÍSO before sunrise. Arriving on an overnight bus from Argentina, I parked myself on a hill and watched the Andes turn bright orange as the bay lit up.

Charles Darwin arrived by dawn his first time to Valparaíso, in 1834. “The *Beagle* anchored late at night in the bay of Valparaíso, the chief seaport of Chile. When morning came, everything appeared delightful ... the atmosphere so dry, and the heavens so clear and blue with the sun shining brightly, that all nature seemed sparkling with life.” So opens Chapter 12 of *The Voyage of the Beagle*, the tale of Darwin’s circumnavigation of the globe.

My own trip from Buenos Aires to Valparaíso roughly matched Darwin’s—I hugged the coast south to Patagonia and then crossed over into Chile. Instead of a passport, Darwin carried letters of introduction; instead of a guidebook, he traveled on the recommendations of those he held in high esteem. Traveling on the recommendation of Darwin himself, I visited Valparaíso after quitting my job and my life in New York.

“The town is built at the very foot of a range of hills,” Darwin writes, “about 1600 feet high, and rather steep. From its position, it consists of one long, straggling street, which runs parallel to the beach, and wherever a ravine comes down, the houses are piled up on each

side of it.” The bay’s narrow coast allows for a few level blocks before the buildings yield to a bulging hillside, whereupon a quilt of multicolored houses drapes over a series of forty-odd bluffs. The amphitheater layout affords almost every house a stunning view of the Pacific and the half-moon harbor, dotted with small fishing boats and massive blue and red container ships.

Valparaíso is Chile’s main commercial hub and seat of its navy and Congress. At the waterfront, sunburned fishermen hawk harbor tours from red, white, and blue fishing boats. The fishermen are portly and gregarious, laughing at one another while waving tourists onto their boat. Sea lions lounge in the midday sun. On the southern end of the promenade, cargo ships unload containers stacked high with sports cars and sneakers from Europe and Asia. Valparaíso remains what it was built to be: Chile’s trade nexus.

In the 1950s, the poet Pablo Neruda visited the city he would later call home. “Valparaíso what nonsense you are, how crazy, crazy port, what a mounded head, disheveled, you never finish combing your hair, you never had time to dress, life always surprised you.” In his *Ode to Valparaíso*, the city seems a perpetual earthquake. Or a tempest. “Soon, Valparaíso, mariner, you forget the tears, you go back to hanging up your pur-

ples, to painting your doors green, windows yellow, everything you transform into a boat, you are the mended bow of a small, valiant ship.”

Beyond the excitement of the port are Valparaíso’s more tranquil hills.

It only costs me 50 cents to ride up one of the city’s renowned funiculars, clicking through the original turnstile. Unveiled in 1883, the Ascensor Concepción was Valparaíso’s first cable car and originally ran on steam, its inauguration reflecting a population boom on the city’s hills, where wealthier porteños escaped the hubbub of the city and enjoyed better views of the bay. The trip takes 30 seconds, all the while the floorboards feel like they’re buckling under me as the funicular is yanked up its greasy tracks. Valparaíso at one time had 30 cable cars, but about half have been shut down, many in the last few years due to safety concerns and low profits. Most locals walk or take the buses.

Valparaíso’s funiculars lift me from the dusty bustle of the lower city into an open-air labyrinth of Victorian mansions and corrugated houses, a mosaic of both bright and faded shades of yellows, pinks, reds, blues. Most everywhere, a mural snakes its way up the street like a series of disjointed frames in a comic book: portraits of the city; a Technicolor hummingbird; a surreal forest scene. Valparaíso is certainly fond of art. It has its

Ascensor Artillería rises above the commotion of lower Valparaíso

COURTESY OF TURISMO CHILE

own ideas about how to decorate public space, and the effort is perpetual. More than once, I stumble on someone in the middle of painting a mural. Peeking into a house on Cerro Concepción—cerro means hill—I see a woman in her studio, paintbrush in hand.

I understand why artists settle here. Almost 200 years after Darwin explored the city, Valparaíso remains relatively free of raucous backpackers and hordes of vacationers. Beachgoers are confined to nearby sandy Viña del Mar, and most sightseers are shepherded to a few key landmarks before their cruise ships heave anchor. What's left is a city of artists, students, fishermen, naval cadets, and people like 87-year-old Jorge Muñoz. I meet him on his stoop at three in the morning as I walk down one of the cerros' narrow backstreets. He has let his two mutts out for their early-morning stroll. Since his mid-twenties, Jorge has lived atop one of Valparaíso's cerros, helping people get in and out of parking spaces and watching their cars for tips. He asks me if I feel something in Valparaíso. I say that I do. He smiles and says the city has a spirit of its own, and that everyone feels it. We chat for a few minutes and then we sit in silence for many more.

Cerro Cárcel gets its name from the prison that has occupied its summit since 1874. One hundred and thirty five years later, Valparaíso started transforming it into a cultural center. Famed Brazilian architect Oscar Niemeyer's original design for the center was rejected for an approach that involved knocking down an outer wall, yielding one of the best vistas of Valparaíso bay. The art museum, library, and performance space are housed in a cool concrete building—a rectangular reflection of the old prison

block that still stands at the other end of the yard. Standing in the former prison yard, I'm surrounded by open space. Nowhere else on Valparaíso's hilly backbone is the land graded so flat. It's quiet, too. The only other person here is a somnambulating security guard. A shorebird breaks the silence, his shrill cries echoing off the former penitentiary's walls.

Pablo Neruda was so enchanted by Valparaíso that in 1961 he built a home at the top of Cerro Bellavista. Five stories tall, it towers over most others and is now a museum. I imagine Neruda looking out over the ocean from this perch. The sea touched him in a profound way, and washes through many of his poems. It's also an element that figured into his homes. His Valparaíso house abounds with nautical touches; lacquered wooden details and portholes line the walls. The top floor is a glassed-in crow's nest with not much more than a desk and a comfortable armchair.

Neruda once said there was no bad wine in Chile. I've been invited to the second floor of Sergio Ríos's house to test out that theory after meeting him while out walking. He and a couple of friends are passing around a bottle and talking about childhood and their parents. All in their early thirties, they were raised in Valparaíso and lived through the dictatorship of Valparaíسان Augusto Pinochet. "It was like everyone was living behind bars," says Sergio. "We kids knew there was more to life, but our parents revered Pinochet. They thanked him for everything." I didn't think they'd be so open to talking about life under autocratic rule, but Sergio paints me a picture. "There were two kinds of houses in town. Above the fireplace in the living room, your parents

either had a picture of the Virgin Mary or a portrait of Pinochet."

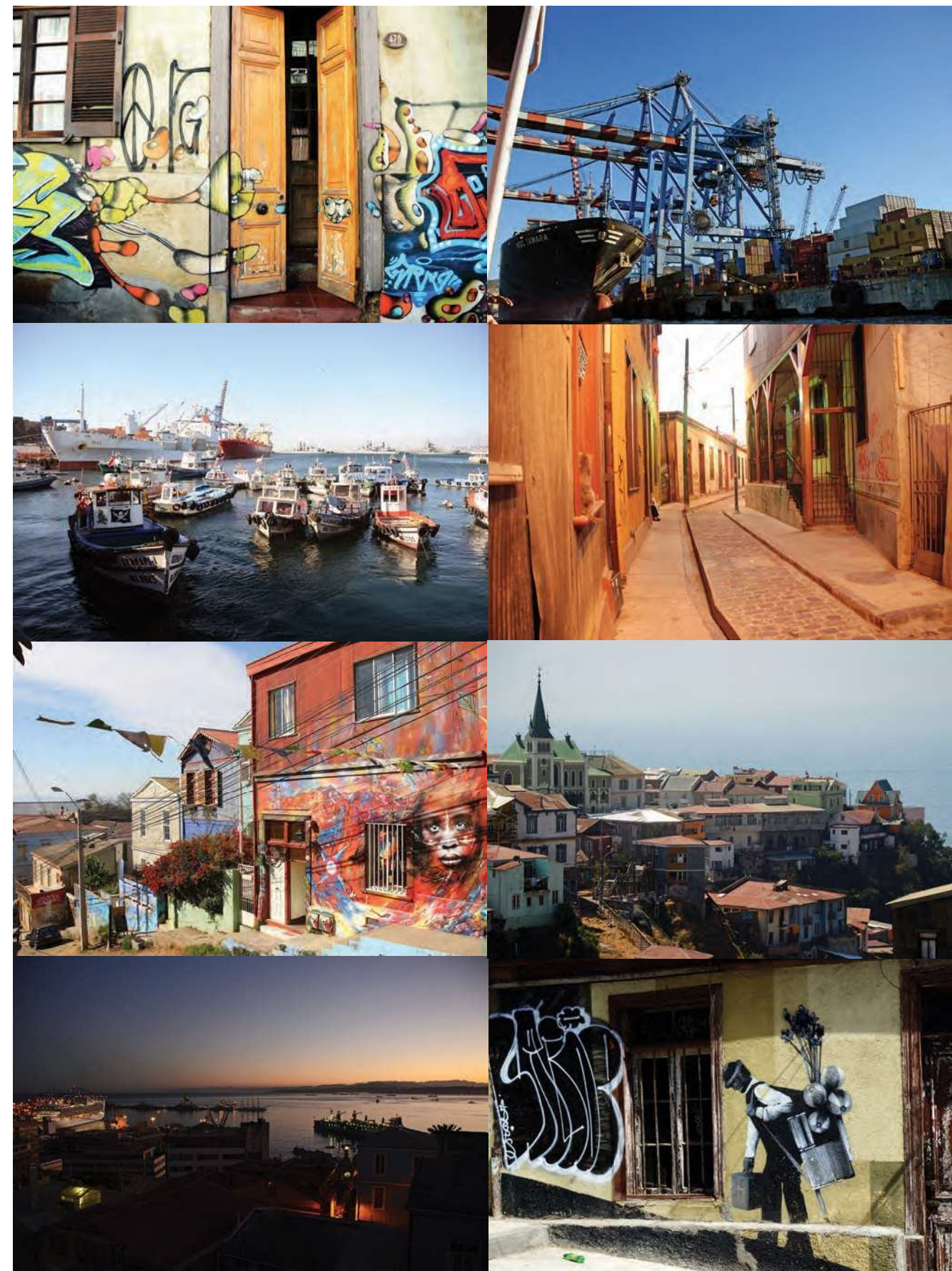
Later, I amble down the long and winding road back to the port. Though the glaring Pacific is always there to hold one's bearing, it's easy to get lost on Valparaíso's hills. As one cobblestone street descends, its accompanying sidewalk may lead to an alley and switch back, and then it's back uphill. It's navigation, M.C. Escher-style. At night, drunk on Chilean wine, the maze is harder to maneuver. The night is sepia from the amber streetlights. The laundry on the clotheslines has been taken in and cats overtake the walkways.

I pass a square filled with dozens of teenagers drinking beer and making out. I head back up another hill and walk by a pair of dance clubs, their balconies heavy with young couples taking drags of their cigarettes in between sentences. Further up the hill, dimly lit bars offer pisco sours and craft beers to an older crowd. In the last few years, a string of new restaurants have opened up on a few of the more popular cerros. They advertise fusion tapas, port-sourced ceviche, and Chilean comfort food, like shepherd's pie and chicken stew.

As I lie down for the night, legs sore from another day's hilly march, I read another Neruda passage. He too is laying down on a cool Valparaíso night, and as he waits for sleep to find him, he listens to the midnight sounds emanating from the port city. "Only a few barks from astral dogs that traversed the night, only a faraway whistle from a ship that was coming or going, confirmed for me the Valparaíso night."

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Opposite: Clockwise from top left, graffiti creeps across a doorway; Valparaíso's very active port; one of the city's many hidden alleyways; looking down on Valparaíso from the former prison on Cerro Cárcel; more graffiti on Cumming Street; view of the port at dusk; a steep and colorful street on Cerro Concepción; fishermen hawk harbor tours for four dollars a head



FROM TOP-LEFT TO RIGHT: JORDAN ROGOFF [1, 4, 8]; ALESZU BAJAK [2, 3, 6, 7]; COURTESY OF TURISMO CHILE [6]