

Historic Quarter of the Seaport City of Valparaíso

Valparaíso is Chile's most important seaport and an increasingly vital cultural center. The city is located in central Chile, where it is capital of the Region of Valparaíso. Although Santiago is Chile's official capital, Valparaíso houses the National Congress. Built upon dozens of steep hillsides overlooking the Pacific Ocean, Valparaíso boasts a labyrinth of streets and cobblestone alleyways, embodying a rich architectural and cultural legacy. Valparaíso is protected as a UNESCO World Heritage Site and is often considered to be one of Latin America's most intriguing urban areas. Valparaíso like most of Chile is vulnerable to earthquakes. The last major earthquake to strike the city directly was in 1906 which devastated the city and killed nearly 20,000 people.

In 2003, the Chilean Congress declared Valparaíso to be "Chile's Cultural Capital" and home for the nation's new cultural ministry. Although technically only Chile's 6th largest city, with an urban area population of 263,499 (275,982 in municipality^[1]), the Greater Valparaíso metropolitan area, including the neighboring resort city of Viña del Mar, is the second largest in the country (803,683 inhabitants).

Valparaíso played an important geopolitical role in the second half of the 19th century, when the city served as a major stopover for ships traveling between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans by crossing the Straits of Magellan. Always a magnet for European immigrants, Valparaíso mushroomed during its golden age, when the city was known by international sailors as "Little San Francisco" or "The Jewel of the Pacific." Examples of Valparaíso's former glory include Latin America's oldest stock exchange, the continent's first volunteer fire department, Chile's first public library, and the oldest Spanish language newspaper in continuous publication in the world. The opening of the Panama Canal and reduction in ship traffic dealt a staggering blow to Valparaíso, though the city has staged an impressive renaissance in recent years.

Valparaíso is located in central Chile, 120 km (74 miles) to the northwest of the capital Santiago. The city is an important educational centre with nine universities. Major industries include tourism, culture, and transport. Valparaíso stages a major festival attended by hundreds of thousands of participants on the last three days of every year. The festival culminates with a "New Year's by the Sea" fireworks show, the biggest in all of Latin America, attended by a million tourists who fill the coastline and hillsides with a view of the bay.

Approximately 50 international cruise ships call on Valparaíso during the 4-month Chilean summer. The port of Valparaíso is also an important hub for shipping of container freight, and exports of wine, copper, and fresh fruit. Travel between Valparaíso and Santiago currently takes some 70 minutes on a state-of-the-art toll road.

The Chilean Congress meets in a modern building in the Almendral section of Valparaíso, after relocation from Santiago during the last years of the military rule of general Augusto Pinochet. Although congressional activities were to be legally moved by a ruling in 1987, the newly built site only began to function as the seat of Congress during the democratically-elected government of Patricio Aylwin, who followed Pinochet, in 1990.

The historic quarter of Valparaíso was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2003.

Source: -- *Wikipedia* [<http://www.wikipedia.org>]