

CHILOÉ'S SEASIDE SANCTUARIES

Text and photographs by Ricardo Carrasco Stuparich

Beautifully integrated into the environment, the stunning wooden churches of this Chilean island are monuments to the rich heritage and spirit of this nation.

A rugged outpost near the continent's end, the island of Chiloé is just the kind of place to test a person's resolve. And it has, for centuries. Its residents endure a rainy, stormy climate that seems to drench the island and everything on it in a penetrating solitude. To the eyes of the person who traverses the pastures, slopes, and cliffs of this place -the largest island in South America after Tierra del Fuego- it seems that even its many churches and chapels begin to appear like lighthouses in the mist. It should surprise no one that sailors over the years have navigated their way along the wrinkles and folds of Chiloé's coastline guided by the taller spires of some of these churches. Men of faith have always found their way to Chiloé.

More than eighty churches are situated along this island and archipelago of some 125 miles, the majority nestled in bays and inlets at the water's edge, as if to never lose sight of the first fact of life here, the meeting of land and sea. Most of them were first erected under the direction of the Jesuit missionaries who traveled and proselytized through the region in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, then saw additions and embellishments by the Franciscans in the nineteenth century. Recently, sixteen of Chiloé's churches were designated part of the Patrimony of Humanity by UNESCO, cited as unique examples of religious architecture in wood, a vibrant melding with native materials and craftsmanship.

Tucked into the inland sea, the provincial capital of Castro is the first stop for most area visitors. Residents here affectionately refer to their church, which was built the same year as the town's founding in 1567, as the "Catedral of Castro." However, it was not always so well appreciated. In 1600, the Dutch pirate Baltasar de Cordes anchored his ship in front of the church and, after robbing the populace, launched an attack, setting fire to the church. It was soon rebuilt only to be razed once again in 1642, along with the entire town, by another Dutch pirate, Enrique Brouwer. Erected again in 1657, it was yet again destroyed by fire in 1772, at which point, a venerable Jesuit church became the main church of the community. That too was destroyed by fire in 1902. In 1910, construction on the present-day church was begun.

The next day, I headed out at dawn to a place set amid gentle hills stirred by a constant breeze off the Pacific Ocean. The mainland panorama could barely contain the looming curtain of the Andes Mountains. After a short drive, I arrived at the church of Nercón. In 1627, this place was an indigenous community of ragtag dwellings attached to the lands granted by the Spanish crown to Francisco García de la Torre. Around 1734, a chapel was built. I approached it through a well-kept, traditional garden, through which a cemetery climbed part way up a hill. Its summit boasts a fine vantage point for viewing the steeple, comprising two octagonal drums, apparently rounded so as to better weather blustery winter winds. The spire is covered with shingles hewn from the larch tree, and the arches at

the entryway are also sheathed in wood. Over the nave, segmented arches rest on cylindrical columns painstakingly painted to resemble marble. The artisans who created this structure had to toil within the mechanical constraints and natural limitations of local wood in order to create arches, friezes, cornices, and columns that elsewhere are the product of stones or brick masonry. I could have stayed there for hours; the longer I stayed, the larger my sense of awe grew.

The following morning my attention was drawn to the height, virtually unrivaled in Chiloé, of the church steeple of Vilupulli, an intriguing name that in the language of the indigenous Mapuche means “the serpent’s hill”. Located in a small village facing the coast, the church was constructed in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century from cypress and coihue (southern beech), over a foundation, like those of many area churches, laid with locally quarried stones. Daybreak pierced the deepest recesses of the nave, revealing resplendent portraits of saints by local artists and columns topped with basket-handle arches holding aloft a flat ceiling.

All the churches are situated within a short distance of one another, so I soon managed to reach the church in the cove of Chonchi, at the island’s narrowest point, as the day’s activities had just begun. Descriptive geographical names, which might also seem to act as warnings, continue here –Chonchi means “slippery land”. But today its church sits fully in the morning sun, which has just vaulted the Andean peaks. The steeple, though, is gone, yanked off its base, I am later told, by a fierce storm. The pediment is meticulously embellished with sections of carved wood set over neoclassical arches that pose a striking contrast to the solemn interior. The structure has been restored several times, but one of the columns still sports a vestige of the original paint simulating a marble surface. An odd feature of the main sanctuary is the absence of parallel walls, with the front wall several inches longer than the back, thus, making the eye believe the structure is larger than its actual 150-foot length by 60-foot width. Along one wall rests a statue of Saint Anthony of Padua, renowned for his aid in recovering lost objects, mending lovesick hearts, and finding a husband.

It is a short barge trip from Chonchi to Lemuy Island, where as I arrived, a group of children were playing with dolls amid the columns of the church at Ichuac. Unusual star-shaped designs carved into the portal were the first feature to draw my attention. Solid single-piece columns bear five lancet arches. On the shingled pediment rests a steeple consisting of one square drum and one octagonal drum, both constructed with coihue, larch, and cypress. The simple sanctuary has no arches; its roof rests over square columns matching those of the portico. The building is not particularly well conserved, but it is attended to by a devoted congregation that, in addition to helping make repairs to the structure, is actively recovering bygone traditions, such as the singing of Easter Canticles and other celebrations.

A few days later I headed north to Dalcahue, whose church, with its portal of nine arches, is the largest of the archipelago’s places of worship. Even though work on the church did not conclude until 1902, records indicate that construction began in 1854, when this small but enterprising town was enjoying a growth spurt, thanks to an economic boom propelled by cattle ranching and lumber industries. Fortunately, successive repair efforts on the church

have been kept up ever since. Nevertheless, members of the congregation point out that part of the floor, a side wall, the portico, and a section of the roof require prompt expert restoration. In the vestry, a wonderful museum features a collection of antique harmonium, artwork, textiles, and important church documents.

Quinchao Island is located within view of Dalcahue, and the barge trip to the island was over almost before it began. The church of Saint Mary of Achao was constructed in the mid-eighteenth century by a group of Jesuit priests using no nails, only wooden joints. Its rude, somber facade offers a stark contrast to the interior, which displays a series of baroque painted and sculpted motifs that cover the altars, pulpits, and walls. As the oldest church on the archipelago, Saint Mary of Achao is a source of pride to local residents who provide assistance to a committee of ten women with the unending work of restoration.

“It’s quite a job to keep up this church,” says Bernardita Oyarzún, a member of the church restoration committee. “We receive more than one hundred visitors every day in the summer season, and many break off pieces of the altars or the carved railings in order to get hold of a keepsake.” She points out some of the damage to me; much of the detail work reveals the hand of recent repair, notwithstanding the fact that the artisans assiduously manage to match the types of wood and the paint pigments and varnishes. They even use the same rustic tools as those that served the original builders so well.

Across from Punta Guantao, six miles south of Achao, is Villa Quinchao, home to a small fishing community and one of the largest churches in the archipelago. The roof over its enormous vault, fashioned from thousands of gray-colored larch shingles, can be seen from many miles away. Specialists and the public alike have wondered how such a small, isolated community came to possess such a large church. The answer is rooted in the nineteenth century when the Straights of Magellan constituted the only sea route between the Pacific and Atlantic oceans. It was at that time, when the passage of so many boats was bringing an economic boom to Chiloé, that this immense church was built. Worshipers in those days arrived in seafaring ships that berthed at the Villa Quinchao port. They often brought along their families, horses, supplies, and changes of clothing to spend the night. In heavy weather they did so inside the church itself, which is why the original building had large side galleries off the nave. Even the horses were accommodated inside. Completed in 1880, the church served as the model for many Chiloé churches. But a decade ago, unusually severe weather threatened it with imminent collapse, leading to rescue efforts to save this and several other churches in the region from destruction. Out of these recovery attempts the nonprofit Foundation of Friends of the Chiloé Churches was born.

A half-day’s journey along the twists and turns of dusty graded-covered roads took me to San Juan Cove, where I was welcomed by a pair of seagulls perched on the church cross. The sun, often a reluctant visitor in these latitudes, had drenched the nearby islands of Linlín and Punta Degar with an unexpected radiance, highlighting an offshore backdrop of salmon nets and the luminous pearly wakes of fishing boats. For its part, the church of San Juan seemed to ply the starry sea. In contrast to other churches in the region, San Juan has no arches; its pediment is simply sustained by one-piece pillars. The larch wood facade dates to the nineteenth century. Inside, the church reflects the diligent care of its community, which faithfully preserves its original appearance.

On the island of Caguach, in the inland sea, the ten-day Festival of the Nazarene of Caguach draws some ten thousand people each year to participate in Chiloé's most popular festivities. By tradition, the Nazarene Festival begins at the seashore on August 23, with the townspeople bearing banners to the strains of passacaglias. A regatta representing the five islands of Caguach, Apiao, Tac, Alao and Chaulinec re-creates the intrepid voyages of the circulating religious missions of past centuries. The date of the church's construction - 1925- seems far too recent to jibe with such popular and deeply rooted traditions, until, that is, it is recalled that the original church was destroyed by fire in 1919, 185 years after its construction.

And this seems to be the story of Chiloé. To build, and then to rebuild, not only these seaside churches of wood –but also the faith-filled communities that have given them life.

Ricardo Carrasco Stuparich
Fotógrafo & Autor
+56 9 88687913
CHILE