

Chile Fact Finding Tour November 2011



It is no coincidence that this report starts with a „no-railway-picture“. Chile’s astonishing landscapes and animals have fascinated your intrepid reporters that much that we had to begin with those guys shown above who allowed us to come pretty close without spitting on us! But be assured, there’s still a lot of railroading going on in this report! To be honest: while writing this report, we would love to pack our suitcases again and board the next flight to Chile.

We (Christoph and Peter) have shown full devotion during this trip, our camera gear and the rental car were used to the limit. We will not run the main tour as hard as we challenged ourselves during the preparation trip, but it was interesting to see, how far you can go – and what you better do not repeat...



Summarising: there are a lot of pretty positive news, but also some disappointing stories. So let us start with the latter ones:

while staying at Santiago de Chile during our search for the **last active E30/E32s**, we were told by FEPASA officials, that all engines have been put aside for some months already. Two long lines of unused electric and diesel locomotives have been built up near the Almeda station, some FEPASA E32 are awaiting their future on a separate spur. It is quite obvious that electric traction for freight and locomotive hauled passenger trains is not longer needed. All passenger

trains are made of Terrasur and Metro EMUs, only a few grain and cement trains are diesel hauled – mostly at night to avoid disturbing the passenger trains. Hmm. One EMU per 15-30 minutes and no spare slots for a freight train? Sounds like a German Railways advisor to Chile...

In addition, the state owned companies EFE (network and infrastructure) and FEPASA (freight) are huge bureaucratic organisations that do not like to get requests for charter trains or other activities which mean an extra amount of work. At the moment it seems unlikely that we will make a huge progress with EFE/FEPASA regarding any activities at/around Santiago. We have planned an extra day around Los Andes instead, offering metre gauge and standard gauge diesel action.

Next disappointment was the ongoing modernisation of Chile's fleet of domestic aircrafts: after LAN Chile introduced brand new Airbus A318 already some time ago, its main competitor, **Sky Airlines**, with whom we will fly some of our domestic air sections during our main tour, also started to integrate a new A320 in its fleet, replacing the iconic Boeing 737-200... Can you imagine what aircraft we had when flying Sky Airlines from Santiago to Antofagasta? You name it! On a more positive site we have to report that Sky Airlines' service on board is that good that we didn't want to disembark after having landed at Antofagasta...



While Santiago was covered under a thick layer of clouds during our visit, we changed to "good weather mode" for most of the remaining trip, starting with our decent into Antofagasta.

At Antofagasta we had booked various versions of rental cars to explore all options. We started with a 2x4 pickup at the airport: classic design with a high and wide load space. But it had a manual shift only and acted like a true lorry. We wanted to change it to a real 4x4 pickup but strangely it was not available. That's really funny because you will notice that 99,9999% of all cars on Chilean roads are red 4x4 pickups. Well, we accepted

an offer for a Toyota 4Runner (pictured above. The guy standing on the roof was not part of the rental package). This car was the perfect choice: spacious, with an automatic transmission, and ready to bring us in contact with the locals and even still working when we decided to (involuntarily) test the vehicle's limits due to our madness. Join us on the main tour for a beer, red wine, or Pisco Sour, and we will tell you the story of a car in a salt lake...

FCAB maintains one of the tidiest yards we have ever seen in South America: while we were walking through dirt and garbage at EFE / FEPASA in Santiago, the FCAB area in Antofagasta was broom-clean. The biggest challenge for FCAB is its well used network between Bolivia and Antofagasta, operating at the limit. Well, you could increase the number of trains by introducing some more sophisticated running schemes, but why should FCAB do it? Everything runs smoothly, FCAB's mother company makes high profits with the current standards, and if nobody complains (not even the visiting railfans!) that a heavy freight train from the Pacific coast to the heights of Bolivia is hauled by 3 smaller diesel locomotives, crawling through the desert with a speed of merely 10 miles/hr, then there's nothing to change. And quite honestly said: the sound of those hard working diesels was terrific!



Th most interesting sections of the FCAB operations in the area are the line between Calama and Ollagüe, and the recently re-opened link between Prat and Pampa (leading to the harbour of Mejillones): if a Chinese JiTong railway engineer would have looked at the Prat line's satellite picture already in the 1980s, he would have done what most Chinese engineers do: copy it. Lots of horseshoe curves, steep gradients and finest diesel action in this hilly area!

Only outstanding point of interest between Antofagasta and the town of Calama is the small railroad village of **Baquedano**.

Well known for its former steam locomotive shed where everything looks untouched for more than 50 years now (beside the junk that seems to be attracted to those places naturally), the Ferronor workshop is worth a visit (we have obtained a permission to visit the shop during our April tour). And again we were reminded of Santiago and the differences between state owned and privately operated railroads: the station of Baquedano has an island position

between the tracks of FCAB on the one site and Ferronor on the other. FCAB uses its track 24/7 with a never ending string of freight trains rushing through the station – but has concentrated all its staff at Prat. Ferronor has had no rail traffic for more than a year now, all rail-heads are covered with dust, the remaining diesel locomotives have been transferred to Iquique – but station and workshop are still staffed. Administration of nothing in the middle of nowhere.



Talking about “nowhere”: here you see the main road from Calama to Ollagüe (and on to Bolivia). We checked it out: you can drive up to 80 miles/hr but shouldn’t do so: pot holes and corrugations need your full attention! And why should you risk your life (or at least the car rental company’s happiness) if the trains you are chasing are that slow that you could even take your bicycle to follow them – if you wouldn’t be on 11.500 ft height already...). And thanks to the perfect driving skills of your reporters (huh?), we managed to move our 2-ton-car over dirt roads and through lava fields spiked with razor sharp stones

and rocks without major damages. In fact, we experienced only 1 tire damage when we had to visit the local tire shop at Topocilla to get a tiny hole repaired. We were charged with an incredible amount of 50 Cents... We tried hard not to forget our rental car company’s advice “stay on the main road!” ... What can be more “main roady” than “Routa 21” to Ollagüe – the official boarder post to Bolivia?

And you do not have to feel alone while driving through the desert although humans are the rarest species in this area. Only 4 small villages exist along the road, no petrol stations wait for customers, and only a few cars pass this



awesome scenery! We drove from Calama to Ollagüe on a Sunday and did not see any other vehicle on the road! True rulers of the desert and the huge salt lakes are flamingoes, alpacas and llamas. If you would drive along the salt lakes at 8 o’clock in the morning’s perfect light, and suddenly a herd of pink flamingoes awakes from its sleep and starts wading through the salty waters, you may want to get lost in the animal kingdom more often. It was terrific!

You will have noticed by now that we got pretty excited about the natural beauty of Chile so far – and we have to tell you, that it is not over yet! Beside all natural life in this harsh region, the stunning world of the volcanoes (dead or alive) made us stopping so many times along the road, even forcing us to make a detour for a better perspective of some peaks, that we had more shots of volcanoes than trains for some times... In 25 years of railway photography we never made so many non-railway shots on a tour officially dedicated to trains than we did on this tour. And we have changed our itinerary a little bit to allow you some action beside the track, too (if you are interested). If not, you can still chase trains. More about this later.

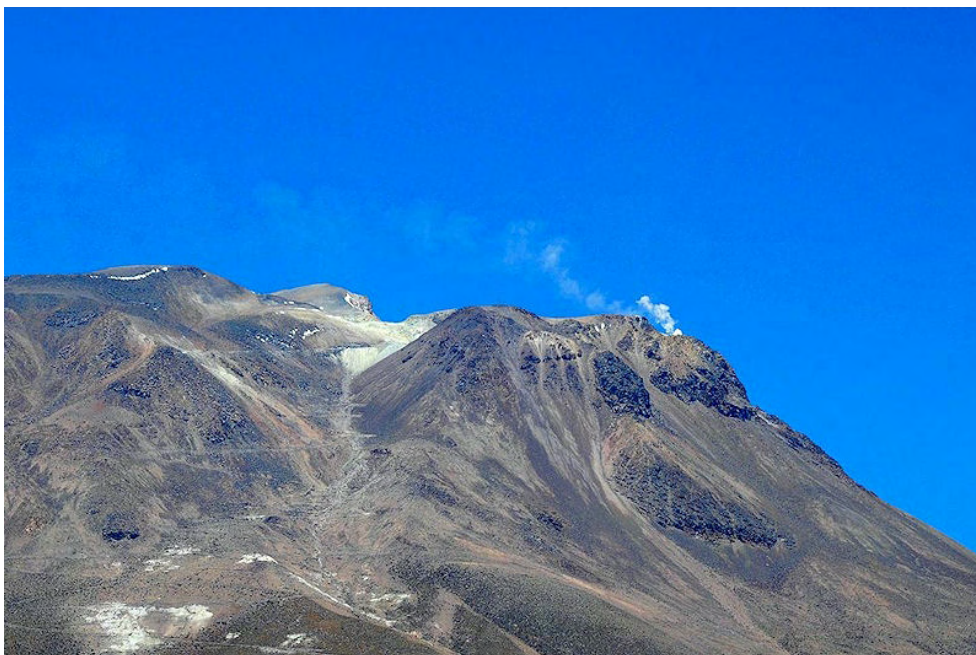


Ollagüe is the checkpoint into Bolivia for road and rail traffic. Being only one of 5 official boarder posts between the two countries, one wonders why traffic levels are that low – but it is politics again... The presidents of both countries do not “like” eachother and can’t find solutions for common challenges and thus there is no interest to boost economic exchange. (OK, that’s the short version of a non-local observer...). Back to the railroads: Bolivian FCA diesels cross the boarder regularly while FCAB diesels end their duties at Ollagüe, having climbed all the way from the sea to the height of 19.325 ft a.s.l.

There is no fixed schedule for the FCAB trains, all trains are operated on demand. All stations between Ollagüe and Prat have been abandoned since the mid-80s, no signalling exists anymore, and trains communicate among eachother and the dispatcher at Prat by radio. On some days you will not see a train for 12 hours, on others they run in viewing distance! FCAB seems to be a pretty professionally organised company, even crew changes in the middles of the desert work flawlessly.

Ollagüe lives from and with the railroad and the boarder crossing. When we arrived at Ollagüe, it seemed that there is nothing else to do. Of course it proved to be wrong but at that time we were busy trying to sort out another problem: thanks to our “perfect” estimation of fuel consumption and maybe even to a subtle “we know-it-all-better-manner” we were running out of petrol. We still would have enough to return to Calama but it would have been a tight ride back. But what could you do if there is no petrol station for the next 150 miles, and all houses on the main street seemed to be locked? So we went to the boarder and asked some waiting locals:

„Is there any petrol station?“ - „No“ - „How can we get petrol?“ - „Follow me“. Problem solved. We learned that a petrol tanker visits Ollagüe several times per week and provides fuel to the locals who have private tanks in the backyards. We bought 10 litres for a fair price and were happy. Even more positive was the discovery of a newly opened hostel: clean rooms, large kitchen – and even a supply of beer plus a huge fuel-tank... We immediately booked all rooms for our main tour in April 2012 and made the owner happy (at least she smiled all over her face). Staying at Ollagüe instead of Calama saves us a daily drive of 130 miles, and we are close to the action. The FCAB guys at Ollagüe are very friendly, they provided us with news about arriving and departing trains whenever they got them.



Even better: Ollagüe’s backyard volcano, coincidently named “Ollagüe”, is not only still active and belches smoke from time to time, but tourists can also drive up to the volcano’s top. If we should experience a gap in train movements, we can visit the volcano – but be careful: on the top you will reach an altitude of 18.645 ft. You need to have a physically strong and healthy condition to enjoy the visit. Otherwise you may get into trouble! And if you can’t get enough of volcanoes: the nearby “Aucanquilcha” waits for your visit, too.

We try to find a similar solution for our accommodation at/near Potrerillos. We will find find a 5-star hotel just beside the railroad, though. At Antofagasta we will stay at the Radisson-Hotel. A superb hotel with a unique location at the beach...

Now comes the toughest part: **SQM's electric railway at Topocilla**. To cut a long story short: the GE-boxcabs still run but nobody knows how it goes on in the future.



Unfortunately, SQM recently adopted a policy of no-tolerance towards visitors and their sometimes strange requests. This wasn't the case all the time, SQM even ran a public tourist train to Quillagua station some years ago. But currently it is quite frustrating to see all goodies in sight but you are not allowed to touch them. Chasing the trains is not the problem and can easily be done, local railroaders are friendly but officials encapsulate themselves and we have not yet found the right key to open the doors. Nonetheless we are still trying various ways to get to the results we envisaged for ourselves.

We found 4 GE boxcabs in service during our November visit: 601, 603, 604, 607. Three new electric locomotives were also seen in service: 651-653. Number 651 is of special interest because it runs with a diamond pantograph.



Five, sometimes even 6 trains are scheduled within 24 hours, all trains are hauled with 2 locomotives because SQM doesn't trust the old GEs anymore but is also not truly happy with the new locomotives' capabilities. The old GE boxcabs are in a pretty bad shape (mechanically and grubby look). SQM does not hide their intention to put all GE boxcabs on the scrap row as soon as possible. The next new electric locomotive, #654, shall arrive within the next 6 months. Nobody at SQM's management wanted to confirm that timeline but locomotive drivers told us that the boxcabs will retire as soon as SQM has a sufficient number of

running new engines on hand.

The current roster sees a boxcab hauled pair of trains in the morning and afternoon hours, while the new locomotives haul only one train during lunch time (truly harsh light!) and more trains over night.

Folks, that's all for the moment. We are still working hard to improve our tour's itinerary for April 2012; if you consider to join the tour, please do not wait too long, there are only 5 seats left while this report is being written (15. December 2011). Our tour will definitely run, don't miss your chance for 2 weeks of fantastic railway and nature photography!

We look forward to return to Chile in April 2012! It is a wonderful country, people are incredibly friendly, and the railroad operations are terrific. Not to mention the volcanoes...

Christoph Grimm & Peter Patt

**Tanago GmbH * Sedanstr. 9 * 12167 Berlin * Telefon: +49 (0)30-79748381 * Telefax: +49 (0)30-79748417
E-Mail: info@tanago.de * www.tanago.de**