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# Opportunities in Chile for New Zealand Tourism Companies

- Barney Irvine and Christina Stringer

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# Opportunities in Chile for New Zealand Tourism Companies

Many aspects of the Chilean tourism market make it attractive to New Zealand operators who are likely to have competitive strengths that can be capitalised on. This raises some key issues for businesses and policy makers who wish to develop tourism-based ties with Chile.

In recent years, the New Zealand-Chile economic relationship has attracted increasing attention from the New Zealand government and academic sectors.<sup>1</sup> The relationship received a boost in 2005 with the signing of the Trans-Pacific Strategic Economic Partnership (TPSEP),<sup>2</sup> which was ground-breaking in the sense that its goal was not to develop bilateral trade, but rather to expand opportunities for “strategic cooperation” between New Zealand and Chile.<sup>3</sup> For New Zealand companies, strategic cooperation entails a conceptualization of Chilean economic growth as an opportunity for mutual gain rather than as a threat.<sup>4</sup> New Zealand companies can use the competitive strengths they possess in key tourism sectors to gain early-mover advantages in Chile, a market that outshines the rest of its region in terms of growth and stability, and the chance to use Chile as a platform for penetration of other South American markets. From the Chilean perspective, the inflow of New Zealand knowledge and expertise stands to help local tourism companies raise quality and competitiveness.

To date, the identification of business

opportunities for New Zealand companies has largely centred on the food value chain. Though the object of less attention, tourism is also an area of significant potential, and one that dovetails with the concept of strategic cooperation. Chile’s tourism sector is achieving steady growth and offers a tourism experience that has much in common with that of New Zealand. Chile has many of the spectacular and highly diverse natural features – lakes, glaciers, forests, fjords – that have made New Zealand popular, yet often on a greater scale and with a greater degree of diversity. Chile and New Zealand attract similar numbers of the high-spending North American and European visitors that natural tourist attractions predominantly appeal to.<sup>5</sup>

Unlike New Zealand, however, Chile is yet to develop an advanced range of tourism products and services to take advantage of its natural resources. This underdevelopment is one of a number of structural weaknesses that continue to hinder the competitiveness of Chilean tourism. For Chile to diversify and modernise its tourism industry, and more fully utilise its natural comparative advantages, it is widely viewed that

foreign expertise and capital will play an important role.<sup>6</sup>

In Chile, New Zealand tourism operators will encounter a fast-growing tourism industry that has many similarities to that of the New Zealand industry but with a deficit of the type of skills, know-how, and capital that exists in New Zealand’s internationally competitive tourism market. It would seem that there are significant opportunities for New Zealand tourism companies to invest in Chile, and that many aspects of the New Zealand tourism model can be replicated in the Chilean context.

This research explores the opportunities that exist for New Zealand tourism companies in Chile, and in doing so provides practical insights for New Zealand businesses and policy makers into the realities of operating in the Chilean market. To achieve its aims, the research addresses three questions:

- Why are New Zealand tourism companies well placed to compete in the Chilean tourism industry?
- Why is the Chilean market attractive to New Zealand tourism companies?
- What factors shape New Zealand tourism companies’ perceptions of how they should engage with the Chilean market?

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## The Chilean tourism industry:

### Overview

Chile is one of the highest ranked countries in terms of growth of revenue from foreign visitors and growth of business and domestic travel.<sup>7</sup> Not only has Chile benefited from an upsurge in global tourism activity, with the international travel and tourism industry growing at an average annual rate of 8 percent from 2000 to 2005,<sup>8</sup> it has also benefited from a number of emergent trends that are strongly in Chile's favour given its geography and economy. These trends include rapid growth in niche and "special interest" tourism activities (such as eco-tourism); rapid growth in meetings, incentives, conferences, and exhibitions; and rapid growth in high-end tourism in general. Chile's recent growth, and its growth potential, are also aided by the fact that the Chilean government is slowly awakening to the contribution that tourism makes – and can make in the future – to the Chilean economy.

### The inbound market

In 2006, Chile's international arrivals were over 2.2 million, an increase of 9.35 percent over 2005 and of approximately 30 percent over the 2000 figure.<sup>9</sup> The recent growth represents a rebound from the post-September 11 2001 slump in global tourism flows. Drivers of growth include the perception of Chile as a safe and stable destination, and increased efforts by the Chilean government to market Chilean tourism abroad. Also, the number of business tourists has increased, in large part due to Chile's economic growth and increased integration into the world economy. Tourism revenues have risen at a corresponding rate:

in 2005 incoming tourism receipts were nearly USD1.4 billion, an increase of 8 percent on the previous year and of 37 percent on 2000.<sup>10</sup> According to Chilean government estimates, by 2010 foreign arrivals will exceed 3 million, and inbound revenues will surpass USD2 billion.<sup>11</sup>

A significant trend in the inbound market has been an increase in the proportion of long-distance arrivals, partly due to increased government efforts to market tourism in North America and Europe. For instance, in 2005, the number of arrivals from Canada, Germany and the US rose by 30 percent, 23 percent, and 14 percent respectively.<sup>12</sup> Long-distance arrivals are drawn to Chile by its unique and diverse natural and cultural attributes, and seek opportunities to experience those attributes more profoundly. They tend to visit the more expensive locations, such as Torres del Paine in the south and San Pedro de Atacama in the north, and opt for domestic air travel more regularly. While long-distance visitors account for significantly smaller numbers than those from neighbouring countries, they make a disproportionately large contribution to tourism receipts: they represented 30 percent of total arrivals in 2005, but 53 percent of total revenues.<sup>13</sup> The

Chilean government has therefore identified this segment as the key target of future efforts to market Chilean tourism abroad, with emphasis on the promotion of special interest activities such as eco- and adventure tourism.

### Challenges and responses

Despite current trends, Chile is still some way from being a leading global competitor as a tourist destination. A number of

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Queen Street,  
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significant structural weaknesses weigh the industry down, and will continue to hamper progress if not addressed. Key weaknesses include an inability to adequately take advantage of the country's natural and cultural resources by converting attractions into tourism products and services; a lack of coordination from the policy-making level down to the private sector; poor regulation; substandard infrastructure; a low standard of tourism training, and a low level of investment in the international promotion of Chilean tourism. These issues reflect a traditionally low level of commitment on the part of the government to tourism development.<sup>14</sup>

Recent efforts by the government to respond to these issues, however, point to a more systematic approach to tourism development on the part of policy makers. In particular, the government launched the Tourism Law project in late 2007, aimed at strengthening the institutional framework underpinning the Chilean tourism industry. In addition, since 2005 Servicio Nacional de Turismo (SERNATUR), Chile's National Tourism Service, has been developing a programme of quality standards that aims to create a series of norms for the tourist industry and a "Chilean seal of quality" brand.<sup>15</sup>

## The study

Because current engagement by New Zealand companies in the Chilean tourism

industry is minimal, this study is based on in-depth semi-structured interviews with four New Zealand tourism companies that are investigating entry into the Chilean market, rather than companies that are already established there. Each company selected had to meet three criteria: it had to be New Zealand-owned and-based, and currently operating in the New Zealand tourism industry; it had to have entered into dialogue with Chilean counterparts regarding a possible market entry; and its planned level of engagement had to go beyond exporting. Four companies (refer Table 1 for companies' profiles) were identified that fit the criteria. These companies hailed from very different areas of the tourism industry – from quality assurance to themed activity parks. Though they differ in their respective degrees of international experience, all have extensive global aspirations. One executive-level representative, either a director or senior manager, participated from each company.

Semi-structured interviews were also undertaken by the lead author with government and tourism personnel in Chile and New Zealand. These interviews touched on broader contextual issues relating to the New Zealand-Chile business relationship, the respective tourism industries, and opportunities for New Zealand involvement in Chilean tourism.

## Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework for this study is the eclectic paradigm of international production. The eclectic paradigm posits that the extent, pattern, and growth of the activities that multinational corporations (MNCs) conduct internationally are determined by the configuration of three sets of forces: ownership advantages (O); location advantages (L); and internalisation advantages (I).<sup>16</sup> Respectively, the three types of advantages reflect the why, where, and how of international activity by companies.

Ownership advantages are competitive advantages that an MNC holds over local counterparts, and that allow the MNC to overcome the additional costs associated with operating in a foreign environment. These advantages can stem from tangible assets, such as natural resources, manpower and capital, or from intangible assets such as knowledge, market access, and entrepreneurial skill.<sup>17</sup> Location advantages, which are often inseparable from ownership advantages, include any features specific to the host country that may drive the MNC to utilise its operations there, such as natural and created resources, international transport and communication costs, investment incentives or disincentives, and cultural distance.<sup>18</sup> Internalisation advantages determine the form of international

Table 1

| Tourism company | Sector                | Age    | Size (ftes, turnover) | Motivation for foreign expansion       | International presence   |
|-----------------|-----------------------|--------|-----------------------|--|--------------------------|
| Company A       | Quality assurance     | 15 Yrs | 13, N/A               | Interest from Chile, belief in product | None                     |
| Company B       | *                     | 4 Yrs  | 8, NZD \$3.5m         | NZ tight market                        | None                     |
| Company C       | Themed activity park  | 20 Yrs | 30, NZD \$3.3m        | Opportunity (new markets)              | Iceland                  |
| Company D       | Rides, adventure park | 40 Yrs | 350, NZD \$50m        | Interest from foreign markets          | Japan, Canada, Singapore |

\* Not included due to commercial sensitivity.

involvement, and occur when a firm believes it is beneficial to combine ownership advantages with foreign-based assets through foreign direct investment (FDI) rather than through the external market. The significance of each of the OLI variables and their configuration as a group will differ between industries and sectors, and between locations.<sup>19</sup>

The interviews undertaken with the four companies focused on respondents' perceived competitive advantages in Chile (ownership-specific advantages), their reasons for being attracted to the Chilean market (location-specific advantages), and their likely choice of entry mode (internalisation-specific advantages).

## Findings

### Ownership-specific advantages

All companies highlighted the differentiation of their product as a factor that currently gave them an edge over competition in the Chilean market. The companies considered themselves to stand ahead of competitors in areas such as product sophistication, price: quality ratio, and product performance and safety. Moreover, each of the four companies stressed that its respective business did not currently exist in the Chilean market.

Technology was also identified by the four companies as a key ownership-specific advantage. For two of the companies, technological strength stemmed from highly advanced IT systems. The other two companies emphasised that a high level of technical expertise was required to effectively and safely operate their respective businesses. Both these companies had developed their technology in-house, and believed that any new entrants would have to pass through a significant learning curve in order to offer any genuine competition.

The nature of the New Zealand tourism industry was also considered a highly significant ownership-specific advantage. The companies in general felt that the advanced infrastructure of the New Zealand tourism industry had conferred upon them knowledge assets that placed them ahead of potential foreign competitors. One company stressed that the fact that the Chilean tourism industry was a mirror image of the 1980s New Zealand tourism market enabled it to interpret and predict movements in Chilean tourism based on the patterns of development of the home market. Another company underlined that success in the New Zealand market gave credibility offshore, due to the competitiveness of the New Zealand industry and its general standards of safety and quality. For another, the small size of the New Zealand tourism industry had allowed strong relationships and a broad level of communication to be established with key segments in the industry; that communication had resulted in information that was invaluable to the design of the company's business model.



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Trade mark and brand image were perceived as significant ownership advantages. Companies believed that they would benefit from awareness of their brand by international tourists and by Chilean government officials, and that their ability to leverage trade marks and branding would be a source of competitive advantage. In addition, knowledge of tastes and requirements of international tourists was signalled as important by three of the companies. This knowledge incorporated not only an understanding of customer preferences, but also skill in developing appropriate marketing strategies.

### Location-specific advantages

Opportunities for tourism in Chile were highlighted as a key advantage of the Chilean market. For the companies, these opportunities were reflected in the growth of foreign tourist arrivals to Chile, and the fact that the volume and source of these arrivals resonated closely with the New Zealand market. As one company noted: “The clientele that we currently service here in New Zealand are the same as the clientele that we would be servicing there [Chile].” The companies also responded positively to the growth of the Chilean tourism market, and to a seemingly proactive stance on the part of the Chilean government towards developing the industry.

Also highly significant was Chile’s political, economic, and social stability. The four companies had been drawn towards Chile by its sound economic management, its low level of corruption, and its reputation as being one of the most attractive business environments of any developing country.

For three of the companies, the existence of a free-trade agreement (FTA) between Chile and New Zealand (the TPSEP) was a critical attraction of the Chilean market. The companies identified advantages, in the double taxation agreement that was signed in the wake of the FTA, and in the increased efforts by the New Zealand government to develop business between New Zealand and Chile.

An awareness of New Zealand tourism within Chile (particularly on the part of the Chilean government) was also highly important. One company representative who had visited Chile described a high level of receptiveness by Chilean officials towards New Zealand tourism. Another company had received an approach by the Chilean Economic Development Agency (CORFO), and a request for a private meeting, during a recent Chilean tourism mission to New Zealand. This expression of interest, and the research that CORFO had evidently carried out on the company, was the catalyst for the company’s decision to seriously explore opportunities in the Chilean market. Meanwhile, the same company opined that the growing popularity of working holidays in New Zealand among young

Chileans had produced a large body of highly enthusiastic “ambassadors” for New Zealand tourism. Young Chilean visitors were often “blown away” by the level of infrastructure supporting tourism in New Zealand; they carried this impression home with them, with many subsequently taking up work in the Chilean tourism industry.

The companies also identified Chile’s natural environment as a critical location advantage. There was a sense that Chile’s natural environment not only held great appeal as a tourist attraction, but also held a particular attraction for New Zealand operators because of its similarity to the New Zealand environment. New Zealand companies possessed business models and technologies that had been designed for precisely the type of natural environment that would be encountered in Chile.

Other significant – but not key – location-specific advantages included size and growth of the Chilean economy, the policy of the Chilean government towards FDI (namely its sustained efforts to woo foreign investors), and proximity to third markets, particularly Argentina. Cultural distance between Chile and New Zealand was considered important by two of the companies. One saw a number of cultural similarities between the two countries, which was an advantage. The other believed that significant cultural distance existed, but that the company had the skills to overcome it. Moreover, the company felt that the cultural distance represented an advantage, given that it could potentially discourage competitors from New Zealand entering the Chilean market. New Zealand government officials in Chile describe perceived cultural distance as one of the key reasons that New Zealand engagement with Chile – in all commercial areas – is not higher.<sup>20</sup> New Zealand companies consider Chile to be somewhere in which it is too difficult to do business, due to such issues as language differences, a lack of historical contact between the two countries, and the companies’ vague perceptions (and often misperceptions) of Chilean realities.<sup>21</sup>

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### Internalisation advantages

Three of the four companies indicated that they would most likely enter the Chilean market via a partnership of some kind; for two this partnership would take the form of a joint venture, while for the other a non-equity involvement through a tightly controlled licensing agreement or a management contract would be preferable. The fourth company was most likely to opt for a full equity approach, but would also consider a partnership.

For all four companies, the desire to ensure adequate quality control was a critical factor within the choice of entry mode. Ensuring quality of service, and thus brand strength, was

considered vital to the success of any Chilean venture. The companies believed that partial or non-equity arrangements were an effective means of achieving that quality of service. Control mechanisms such as quarterly consistency checks, close monitoring of ticketing, and quality control visits could be written into licensing and franchise agreements to ensure quality standards were maintained.

The choice of entry mode was strongly motivated by a need to respond to barriers to doing business in Chile. These barriers included a lack of spoken English, potential complications within the regulatory environment, the need for local contacts and networks, an at times machismo-oriented business culture, and a sub-standard service culture. The companies recognised that harnessing local knowledge through partnerships with domestic companies could be the ideal means of overcoming these barriers. While the New Zealand company brought industry knowledge and marketing expertise, for instance, the local partner provided expert knowledge of language, culture, and the business environment. For one company in particular, past experience had shown that such local knowledge was invaluable.

Chile's economic and political stability reduced the risks of entering the Chilean market, and made an at least partial equity involvement appealing for two of the companies. The sophistication of many aspects of Chile's business culture was taken as a sign that suitable business partners could be located.

### Implications of findings for companies and policy makers

The findings tie in with a number of underlying issues that have important implications for New Zealand companies and policy-makers looking to develop tourism-related business ties with Chile. Firstly, the sector variation between the selected companies is an illustration of the range of opportunities that exist for New Zealand tourism companies in Chile. These opportunities fall into three broad sub-segments of the tourism industry: activities and attractions; knowledge and advisory services; and ancillary products and services. There is ample scope for a number of products that are successful in New Zealand to be offered in Chile, either because they are not currently offered there or because those available are of

sub-standard quality. These cruises include adventure sports, vehicle rentals, thermal resorts, accommodation, adventure parks, wine tours, and indigenous tourism. Within the knowledge and advisory services sub-sector, there are potential opportunities in tourism policy and planning (especially given recent efforts by the Chilean government to develop an institutional framework for tourism), and in information services and the administration of resources. Opportunities in the ancillary products and services sub-sector could include tourism and travel clothing and accessories, which are expensive and limited in range and availability in Chile.

Secondly, "New Zealand-ness" is a significant advantage for New Zealand tourism operators in the Chilean market. As the findings suggest, there seems a general warming towards the prospect of engaging with the New Zealand tourism sector within the Chilean government. Although a certain degree of public sector indifference towards tourism remains, senior officials in CORFO and SERNATUR have expressed strong interest in working with New Zealand tourism companies.<sup>22</sup> Yet this attitude is by no means restricted to the public sector. Right through the Chilean

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**Dave Barker** "Rock Fishing Muriwai Beach"  
Muriwai Beach, West Auckland, February 2008



**Brent Glover**, "Red Jive"  
Auckland Domain, March 2007

## RESEARCH

tourism industry, there is a strong perception that New Zealand can serve as a model on which Chilean tourism can base its development. Engagement with New Zealand companies is an opportunity to draw on knowledge and experience that these companies can offer.<sup>23</sup>

Thirdly, the perceptions of New Zealand tourism companies indicate that although difficulties exist with entry into the Chilean market, these difficulties are surmountable. The studied companies eluded to a number of challenges, such as the lack of spoken English, the potential complications of the regulatory environment, the at times machismo-oriented business culture, and the poor service culture. Other, mainly cultural, difficulties can be added to the list. These include generally low employee productivity and initiative; a perceived lack of respect for verbal agreements, and a propensity to renege without warning on a strong expression of commitment or shared vision; an often short-term outlook in Chilean business, where the lure of immediate gains is a stronger impetus than longer term considerations; and relatively high levels of paperwork required to administer a business.<sup>24</sup>

The reality is, however, that these difficulties are less burdensome than those that New Zealand companies face in many other countries in which they successfully operate.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, as the companies recognised, the difficulties can effectively be over-

come through the use of partnerships with local entities and, in the case of the service culture, through training. Amongst New Zealand businesses and government officials located in Chile, the consensus view is that local partnerships will be the best means of entering the Chilean market for most New Zealand companies.<sup>26</sup> Local partners can help overcome the language barrier, gain access to government financial instruments, and navigate the more difficult areas of the Chilean business culture, though it may be advisable for the New Zealand company to validate the intentions of the local partner through securing an early financial commitment to the venture.<sup>27</sup> Valuable local guidance can also be obtained through contracting Chile-based consulting services, which can provide a level of engagement with Chilean businesses, the public sector, and the legal system that cannot be acquired any other means.

While New Zealand tourism companies must be able to deal with perceived cultural distance, they must also possess a significant degree of ambition. The studied companies were characterised by a strong belief in the global potential of their product and, interestingly, all had bypassed (or were looking to bypass) the common testing ground for international expansion by New Zealand companies: Australia. Interview sources reiterated the widely held view that the absence of precisely this type of ambition is another fundamental hurdle to greater engagement by New Zealand companies internationally,



The physical charms of Chile.

including in the Chilean market.<sup>28</sup> New Zealand business leaders often lack the vision and drive required to transform their companies into global operations, and allow their aspirations to be curtailed by the “boat, bach, beamer syndrome”, where ultimate career goals are more about achieving a comfortable lifestyle than building enduring financial success.<sup>29</sup> At the same time, however, such issues illustrate the competitive opportunities that exist for New Zealand companies that are prepared to break the mould and move into markets such as Chile.

## Conclusion

In the Chilean tourism sector, New Zealand companies are likely to have an immediate head start over foreign competitors. This competitive advantage builds on the benefits New Zealand companies already enjoy as a result of having business models and technologies that are designed to fit the type of natural environment found in Chile. The established trade mark and brand images associated with New Zealand companies are an additional competitive advantage. Furthermore, New Zealand

tourism companies are well placed to compete in the Chilean markets due to their knowledge of the tastes and requirements of international tourists and in particular, those likely to travel to Chile.

At the same time, New Zealanders in general enjoy a positive profile in Chile; they are seen as able, honest, like-minded, and laid back in a way that separates them from many other nationalities.<sup>30</sup> In addition, the findings point to the fact that, for New Zealand tourism companies, entry into the Chilean market requires the ability to overcome perceptions of cultural distance that exist in the home market. The studied companies showed that it was entirely possible to see beyond the perceived cultural distance. Indeed, as one firm suggested, the perceptions could be interpreted as an advantage, given that they reduced the chances of New Zealand competitors appearing in the Chilean market. Greater involvement in the Chilean market will, however, require New Zealand tourism operators to overcome a possibly more challenging hurdle: a traditional reluctance to look beyond the comforts of the domestic environment. ■

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