

One for the **bucket** list

Liz Price reports from a racing trip to Chile and a day out at the Primera Pasada Derby. She found a confident South American nation with a thriving and vibrant sport

THOROUGHBRED RACING'S final frontier has to be the Chilean Derby that takes place on the first weekend in February at the Valparaiso Sporting racecourse in the seaside resort of Vina Del Mar, Chile.

How the event has remained hidden from European racing enthusiasts is a mystery. It is far from lacking fame in Chile, where literally everyone, from the friendly waitress in the fabulous fish restaurant in quirky Valparaiso to the even friendlier shoepolisher in the

streets of Santiago (Chileans are obsessed with shoes), knows about the Derby.

Yet, in Europe, it is always the Kentucky Derby or races in Asia, such as the Japan Cup or the Hong Kong International races that feature on the bucket list or are cited as examples when it comes to big crowds.

However, on that first sunny Sunday in February, the Valparaiso Sporting Club, founded like the other three Chilean racecourses by the British, was heaving with people.

"The Derby is our most popular race,

followed by the El Ensayo, the oldest stakes race in South America, which is run at the Club Hipico de Santiago," explains Marcel Zarour, breeder, owner and president of the OSAF, the South American equivalent to the IFHA.

"We get up to 100,000 spectators on Derby day, they fill the stands and the infield."

The spectators who come from all over the country certainly get their money's worth – if they actually had to pay to get into the infield, entrance is free.

As a general rule, women never pay, which



Runners in the Group 1 Primera Pasada Derby. The race was won by the Scat Daddy filly Solaria

makes first time visitors smile and ensures that the mixed crowd is animated by the presence of hundreds of children.

Derby day is very family orientated, but then, with no less than 28 races on the card and a 9.30am start it might prove difficult to get a babysitter. But just as everywhere else in the world, the Derby is the highlight of the card and hence is one of the last races of the day.

It is run just before the sun sets in the evening, leaving spectators just enough time to find their chairs, umbrellas, barbeque utensils and stray kids before leaving the track. As in England, the Group 1 El Derby is

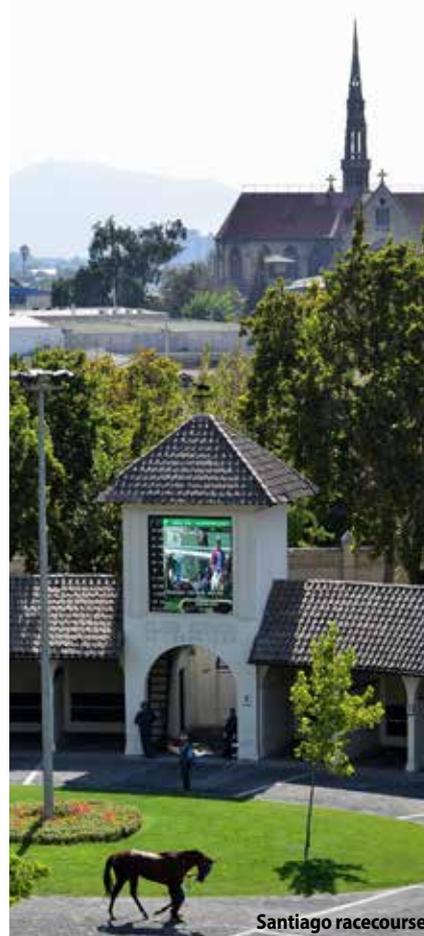
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run over a 1m4f, but, unlike Britain, it attracts nearly as many three-year-old fillies as colts. In fact this year's event was won by the filly Solaria, a daughter of Scat Daddy and out of So Linda. She smashed the track record, covering the 1m4f in 2.23.34mins.

It was stifling hot that day, the turf track was very fast and she was hugely impressive. She would have certainly made an interesting addition to the European fillies' races this summer, but her owner is more inclined to send her to North America, as surprisingly (or not), the idea of running in a European race is considered nearly as far-fetched as running on the moon. However, as things turned out, she was quickly sold on as a broodmare to Japan.

Solaria's sire Scat Daddy, a son of Johannesburg, who shuttled to Chile for three seasons, has been a massive hit in the thin country. However, Scat Daddy will no longer travel to Chile as "he has apparently become too good for us", as one disappointed local breeder miserably explained.

With Scat Daddy's Group 1 winner No Nay Never making headlines at Royal Ascot and Deauville last season, his demand has shot skywards and hence it was no



Santiago racecourse



South American racing was missing off the Longines "map" so it now sponsors the Latino Americano



The racing industry is indeed healthy in Chile and even growing

wonder that the Solaria was snatched up immediately for breeding purposes.

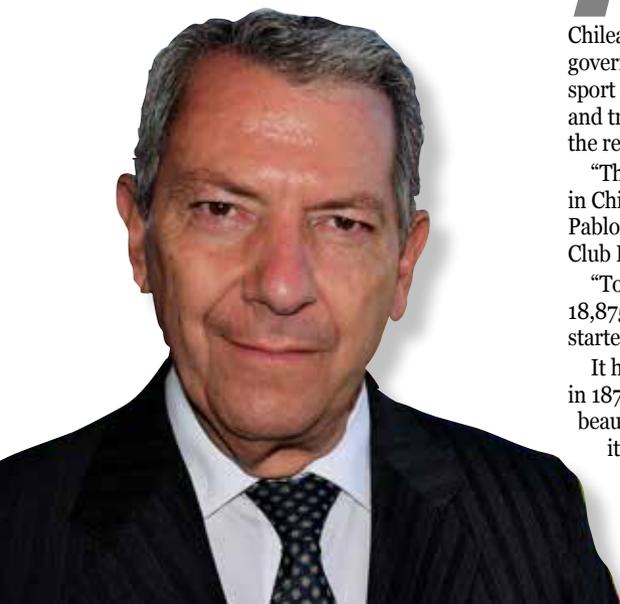
If Scat Daddy has proved very successful in Chile, so too has Tumblebrutus, who dominates the Chilean sires' list. In fact, when studying the race card, two things stand out.

First, Chilean-bred stallions are few and far between and, second, Coolmore seems to have a firm grip on the Chilean market.

"Chileans are quite suspicious of Chilean-bred stallions," confirms Marcel Zarour, who owns Haras El Sheikh and stands amongst others Auguri, one of the few domestically bred successful stallions. A son of Iroko and Aleteada, Auguri's offspring have won the Group 1 El Ensayo and the El Derby, yet demand for him is still practically nonexistent.

"It doesn't work like that in Chile," adds Zarour. "It doesn't matter that you have a good Chilean sire, the belief is that a foreign one will still be better."

Unlike Europe or North America,



racehorses in Chile are mostly owned by breeders who stand their own stallions. These stallions primarily cover that owner/breeder's own mares and are only rarely used by others.

At Haras El Sheikh, split between Calera de Tango outside Santiago and a 820-acre farm in Futrono in the Lake District, Auguri has in the past been joined by sires such as Red Rocks.

Currently Haras El Sheikh features former Prix Morny runner-up Layman, as well as Breathless Storm, Colonialism, Ocean Terrace and Sudan on its roster. Across the road from Haras El Sheikh, at the Haras Porta Pia, the set-up is similar. The 2010 Breeders' Cup Turf winner Dangerous Midge will mainly cover the stud's own mares and only when (or if) his offspring are successful will other breeders come and use him.

Expectations are high and currently all the pressure rests on Dunkirk's shoulders whose stock is making its racecourse debut this year, while Soldier Of Fortune's yearlings are still roaming the fields.

There are 1,800 foals born every year in Chile and the demand for thoroughbred racehorses is continuously growing. Currently there are more than 2,000 horses in training for a population of about 17 million people.

ALTHOUGH FOOTBALL is very popular in Chile, the horseracing industry has still remained very healthy. There are no bookmakers in Chile and the sport is funded via the Chilean Tote that pays three per cent to the government, puts 27 per cent back into the sport and the running of the four racecourses and training centres, while the punters keep the remaining funds.

"The racing industry is indeed healthy in Chile and even growing," confirms Juan Pablo Lira Ortuzar, the general manager at Club Hipico de Santiago.

"To give you an example, in 2010 we had 18,875 starters and in 2013 we had 20,285 starters."

It helps that the racecourse, which opened in 1870 and is without any doubt the most beautiful racecourse in the world thanks to its majestic stands, marble hallways, dark wooden beams and beautifully sculpted

fountains, last year gained the addition of a sand track.

"We race in Chile all year round and it is quite difficult to maintain the turf track, especially in winter," explains Ortuzar. "So because there was an increasing demand for more races, we made a \$7 million investment and put in a sand track."



Juan Pablo Lira Ortuzar, the general manager at Club Hipico de Santiago, is delighted with the popularity of racing in Chile at present

“It actually meets two objectives as it allows us to increase the number of races we run, but it also supports the export business as our neighbouring countries prefer to buy horses who have run on dirt, rather than on turf.”

No expense seems to be spared when it comes to making the racing experience an

enjoyable one. In fact, the Club Hipico in Santiago even has a screen in the lift that broadcasts the race live, so if you haven't been quick enough to leave the paddock on a busy race day, you need not worry as you won't miss a second of the action.

There is a race meeting at the Club Hipico every Friday, while the Hipodromo Chile, also

located in Santiago, races every Saturday.

Not every card has 28 races, but a 19-race card is not unusual. It seems an incredibly long day to any European racing fans, but if you don't join the crowds in the infield, instead joining the members in the clubhouse, you are in for a real treat.

In fact, the service on the day of the Derby

Chile is a beautiful country in which to breed racehorses





was second to none. Chilean food is rich in flavours, the wines are award winners, the national drink Pisco Sour has to be enjoyed at least twice a day and the atmosphere is fabulous.

Chileans go racing with all their family in tow and kids are often dressed in jockey's silks, while mum and dad get busy with huge slabs of beef over gigantic barbeques.

Betting on the racecourse is easy with the lowest stakes being 200 pesos, which is less than a US\$1. There are also about 200 betting shops spread over the country, all operated by the local tote.

The only criticism one could find is that races will be slightly delayed if there isn't enough money in the betting pool. Continuous announcements are made and the total sum that can be won on the race flickers across the bottom of the screen until it is deemed high enough. Obviously this means that horses often have to turn for ages in front of the stalls, which would be unacceptable in Europe where horses are loaded as quickly as possible in order to reduce the wait.

THE STYLE of the Chilean jockeys, who are lucky enough to actually benefit from some form of apprenticeship, is quite different to the North American or European riding style. They move about a lot on the horses and were surprisingly tall. Becoming a jockey or a trainer is a sought-after profession in Chile, where the first four placed horses receive prize-money and where the minimum prize-money for a race is \$2,500.

“The agreement with Longines takes our racing to a new level. It puts Chile firmly onto the map of the racing world”

Considering that the average yearly disposable income in Chile is \$11,000, earnings from racing appear certainly very lucrative. The 1m4f Group 1 El Ensayo is worth \$120,000 to the winner and there are about 200 trainers in Chile all hoping to get a cut of it.

Sponsorship is still in its infancy in Chile much like the rest of South America, but 2014 marked an important milestone with the arrival of Swiss watchmaker Longines.

Following a five-year partnership deal with OSAF (Organizacion Latinoamericana de Fomento del Sangre Pura de Carrera), the Latino Americano, South America's most important Group 1 race, which changes location each year, has seen its prize-money increase by \$100,000 to \$500,000.

It will be run under the name of Longines Gran Premio Latino Americano and is South America's richest horse race. The news of Longines' commitment was announced on Derby day at Vina del Mar, where Longines

also lent its name to one of the races on the card, the Clasico Longines.

“Longines has been involved in horseracing since 1878,” explained Juan-Carlos Capelli, vice president of Longines and head of international marketing.

“We have partnerships with racing countries all over the world, but when I looked at the map I saw that we were missing in Latin America.

“Thanks to Louis Romanet, who introduced us to the OSAF, we are now here and enjoying it very much. Chile is steeped in horseracing history, the people are friendly and it is amazingly well organised. It's really like Switzerland and it is a great pleasure to be here. I mean look at all the people here, it's bursting!”

For Carlo Rossi Soffia, the chairman of the board of directors of Valparaiso Sporting, the arrival of Longines signals a new era. “The agreement with Longines takes our racing to a new level,” he confirms. “It puts Chile firmly onto the map of the racing world.”

The racing industry as we know it is constantly evolving and it can only be a matter of time before Chile and the other South American racing countries will receive the good reputation they are working so hard to achieve.

The planned Pan-American conference, planend in New York in June 2015, must be used to address all the relevant issues such as quarantine, medication and standardisation, as it would be a real shame if the South American efforts would go unrecognised.

Obviously a Chilean-bred runner at Royal Ascot would also go a long way towards raising the country's profile, but while that might still be a little way off, in the meantime I can recommend a visit to the Chilean Derby, as an unforgettable experience for any racing enthusiast. ■

Traditional pastimes still popular in Chile

