

PLEASE MAKE IT STOP SHAKING IN CHILE

An Expat's Experience With Her First 8.8 Earthquake

>By Ada Letelier, Published On: Wed, March 3rd, 2010

The strong jolt nearly made me fall off the bed. Then I heard a loud scream from my husband.

"Ada, get up," he yelled. My husband never calls me Ada – only when he is angry with me.

As I started to get off the bed another jolt threw me to the ground. My husband raced out of the room and I tried to follow him. It was pitch black and I couldn't see a thing. We met in the small hallway as the building continued to rock back and forth for what seemed to be an eternity. Please make it stop, please make it stop, were the only thoughts that kept going through my mind. We clung to each other for support but also because we were frightened out of our minds. Then came the sounds of things breaking as they crashed onto the floor, screams from outside our door and then suddenly, water began to gush from somewhere above us.

"Where is that dam flashlight?" my husband kept saying.

"We have candles in the closet," I said.

When the rocking finally stopped my husband yelled at me to get dressed and get my most important documents – my passport and carnet, nothing else. He began to race around like a madman.

"Open the door," he yelled. "Make sure the door is open."

"Why?" I asked.

"Because if it gets stuck we can't get out."

He went in search of the flashlight and began to pull all the plugs out of the wall. With flashlight in hand, he went outside. He yelled at the people on the floor below us.

"Any news?" he said.

"No," they yelled back.

A woman at the end of the hallway yelled to us to come get her; she was alone. I walked over and grabbed her. She was shaking like a leaf. We huddled in the hallway, trying to decide what to do.

"That water is coming from somewhere," said my husband.

"The swimming pool is above us," I reminded him. "maybe it suffered some structural damage."

"You know," I said, "in the article that the Santiago Times put out last week about what to do in case of an earthquake, they recommended lying down next to a large object, a sofa for example, in case you couldn't get out." My husband looked at me, skeptically.

"Let's go," I said, after we felt another small tremor. "Forget the sofa, I want out."

"Put on something warm," my husband said. "We don't know when we will be able to come back."

We started up. We are on the fourth floor and had to go the thirteenth, where the lobby and entrance to the building is. Don't ask, that's the way this building is constructed. You have to go up to get out.

As we made our way up, we met other people who had also decided it best to try and leave the building. I kept looking at the numbers as we kept climbing; fifth floor, eighth, tenth, finally thirteenth floor. As we emerged out into the lobby, we saw mounds of broken glass on the floor. Shards still hung suspended from the door frames.

"Be careful," yelled the custodians of the building. We raced out.

"To the left, to the left," yelled one man to his family (wife, grandparents and two small children).

"Why left?" I asked.

"Away from anything that has glass," he said. As I looked up I saw that the beautiful canopy that graces the entrance to our building is made completely of glass.

As we huddled there, my husband raced around trying to see if he could get any information.

Then a shout from the crowd informed everyone that a possible tsunami was heading our way.

"Do you think that's true?" I asked my husband.

"I'm not waiting to find out," he answered. "Let's move further up the hill."

So we all walked; well, we may have run, further up the hill.

There we stayed for the next three hours. My husband's gaze fixated on the ocean.

As some of the cell phones began to work, people would run over to whoever had contact and listen in. It's an 8.8 earthquake. The epicenter is near Concepcion.

"An 8.8, but that is impossible," I said to myself. "How is this building still standing? And it is built on a sand dune, as most of these new buildings in Reñaca are. Thank god for those strict building codes."

The cold began to grip my body. "I'm freezing," I said.

My husband was also getting cold. He said he would go back and bring some blankets.

He left and returned with sweaters, hats and blankets. The only thing missing was the hot chocolate. What a guy!

As he put the blanket around my body and told me to sit down with my back pressed against his knees, I could feel the warmth return to my body. As I let myself sink down on the cold humid ground, my thoughts went to my daughter in New York. She must be frantic I thought; maybe not. During the 9/11 terrorist attacks I was in New York and she was a student in Washington, D.C. just several blocks from the White House. There was no communication then either until late that evening. She's a trouper, I thought, she will be okay. And then I thought of Haiti and I started to cry.