

WANDERLUST

The Great Collide

THE CENTRAL VALLEY OF CHILE IS WHERE MOUNTAINS MEET SEA
BY EVELYN PFEIFFER



PHOTOS: CHILE TOURISM AND EVELYN PFEIFFER

Casa Higuera



Vina de Mar

Valparaiso



The Central Valley of Chile offers the possibility for vineyard-hopping, skiing and enjoying the sand and sea; all in one day. Amidst the hectic pace of Santiago, Valparaiso and Viña del Mar, you'll find great spaces for art, good food and entertainment.

Santiago, the capital of Chile is hot. You can tell by the growing influx of tourists, arriving from all around the world. Countless international publications have highlighted Santiago amongst the best cities to visit. The New York Times ranked Santiago at the top of its list in the article 'The 41 Places to Go in 2011'. CNN International gave it third place in its ranking of the world's 10 most-loved cities. Even the famous music festival Lollapalooza gave it the thumbs-up, choosing Santiago as the first foreign city to visit when expanding its reach beyond the U.S.

To avoid missing out on anything in this city of six million people, three methods of exploration are recommended. Firstly, go on a lone adventure along the Capital Route, via public transport and by foot. You can

request for a step-by-step guide to the main neighbourhoods of the city at the Tourist Information Office (1550 Avenida Providencia).

Inside this guide, you'll find information on the historic districts of Central Santiago and Yungay, the culinary and artistic sectors of Bellavista and Lastarria, and the exclusive Alonso de Cordova section of the city, which comprises designer shops, boutiques, art galleries and dozens of gourmet restaurants.

Another way is to get around via the red double-decker buses, similar to those that run through New York, London, Madrid and Paris, and do a "hop-on, hop-off" exploration of the 13 emblematic stops along their route. Lastly, you can take a guided tour by bike, with an itinerary that encompasses visiting historic sites that emphasise the idiosyncrasy, popular culture and everyday life of Santiago.

Whichever option you choose, there are some places that you simply cannot miss. The first is the Central Market, located on the northern edge of the historic city centre, just steps from the Mapocho River. This market is the city's reference for traditional cuisine; amongst the booths you'll

find an endless variety of fish and seafood dishes, many of which are impossible to translate; unique and original of Chile.

The Bellavista area, which is the symbol of Santiago's bohemian art scene, is another place that should be on your "must-see" list. Here, you'll find boutiques, art galleries, fine local crafts, cafes and top-notch eateries. Be sure to check out the section known as "Patio Bellavista", with its international restaurants and fine craft shops.

As you walk around, you'll come across La Chascona, the former home of Nobel Prize poet Pablo Neruda. It has since been converted to a museum and leads to one of the entrances of the Metropolitan Park, also known as Cerro San Cristobal. Traverse the park on foot or by bicycle and car, or take a ride on an antique tram-style elevator to the summit, where you can take in excellent views of the city and the surrounding mountain range.

Hole yourself up at the W Santiago, which was deemed the best hotel in the world by Travel & Leisure for its architecture and design. Choose from 196 rooms, including 20 suites and 13 Cool Corner Rooms. A lovely boutique option would be The Aubrey, which houses 15 cosy rooms within a



The Aubrey

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fully restored 1927 mansion. Many of the terraces overlook Cerro San Cristobal.

Chile has become a major exporter of New World wines. And in the outskirts of Santiago, numerous vineyards flourish and are open to public. Maipo Valley is one of the oldest wine production regions in the zone, with long-standing traditions and vines that have been optimally adapted from those originally brought from France during the 19th century. Its Mediterranean climate and soil characteristics make it particularly suitable for red varieties, such as Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot.

Some of the more well-known vineyards include Conchay Toro, the largest wine producer and exporter in Latin America and one of the 10 largest wine companies in the world, the Santa Rita vineyard, which boasts a cellar dating back to 1880 and Cousiño, one of the oldest vineyards in Chile, with a winery built in 1872.

Heading west from Santiago toward the coast, you'll encounter Casablanca Valley, where conditions are ideal for growing strains of white grapes, such as Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc. One of the highlights is the Emiliana vineyard, which is one of the few in Chile that thrives on a 100 per cent organic production process. Plan for a romantic picnic at Emiliana: upon request, everything can be provided, including a tablecloth, glasses, organic cheese, bottled water, fresh whole-grain breads, dried fruits and a bottle of wine.



Photo: CHILE TOURISM

Stay at Hotel Casa Real, a luxurious property located at the Santa Rita vineyard, Maipo Valley. Besides enjoying the comfort of your room, take minutes and hours to explore the beautiful vineyard, cellars, restaurant and the Andean museum. The Casona in Matetic Vineyard, Casablanca Valley offers seven spacious rooms edged with an elegant, sophisticated flair. Indulge in fine cuisine and get active with horseback riding and biking during your time here.

After visiting Casablanca Valley, meander your way to Viña del Mar, where pristine beaches attract thousands of visitors every summer. February is the busiest month, especially during the days of the International Music Festival of Viña del Mar, the largest music festival in South America. If you fancy wind-surfing in a pool, head to San Alfonso del Mar. This huge resort is located south of Viña del Mar and is famous for having the largest pool in the

SKI FUN

Between June and September, the Andes Mountain Range is covered in white. A few of the best ski and snowboard centres are located just 40 miles from downtown Santiago, including El Colorado, La Parva and Valle Nevado. All have excellent hotel facilities, restaurants and equipment rental services. If you prefer to ski beyond the range of the lifts, you can arrange for heli-skiing, which consists of ascending to altitudes of over 4,000 metres via helicopter, and then swishing your way down through the virgin snow. It's a unique way to experience the adrenalin the Andes can deliver.



GETTING THERE

Comodoro Arturo Merino Benitez Airport (SCL) has international connections between North and South America, Europe and Asia, with 17 airlines operating regularly. From Santiago, you can travel to the vineyards and coastal areas via guided tours, car or public bus.



USEFUL INFO

Guide to cities
• www.chile.travel
• www.turistik.cl
• www.labicicletaverde.com



CHECK-IN SANTIAGO

• W Santiago www.starwoodhotels.com
• The Aubrey www.theaubrey.com

WINE VALLEYS

• Hotel Casa Real www.santarita.com
• The Casona www.mateticvineyards.com

COASTAL AREAS

• Casa Higuera www.casahiguera.com
• San Alfonso del Mar www.sanalfonso.cl

world (one kilometre in length!). There is also a spa and aquarium within its premises.

Just nine kilometres away from Viña del Mar, you'll find a city with a completely different identity: the port of Valparaiso, whose historic centre is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Long ago, a settlement sprang up without planning and steadily grew amongst the steep hills surrounding the port. Today Valparaiso stands out with its narrow winding streets, stairways and the many colourful houses that seem to "suspend" from the hills.

Valparaiso is recognised as the cultural capital of Chile. The Concepción and Alegre hillsides are brimming with workshops for painters, with sculptors and designers found along the passageways of Yugoslavo and Gervason. There are also a handful of quaint boutique hotels and gourmet eateries, which maintain the picturesque style of the city. A great example is the restaurant El Desayunador, which literally translates to "The Breakfast Eater". Here, you can have breakfast at any time of the day. Try "El Porteño", which is made up of consommé, served with homemade bread, coffee and a pan of goat cheese with tomato.

For overnight-trippers, check out Casa Higuera, a boutique hotel housed in a 1920s building that is reminiscent of the port houses in the early 20th century. Plus, it has one of the best views of Valparaiso bay. Although most advise taking a guided tour of Valparaiso, a better option would be to snag a map to help you find your way back after deliberately losing yourself amidst the enchanted labyrinth of streets and delectable gastronomy that make up the framework of this city. Watch out – there are surprises lurking in every corner, waiting to delight and thrill. ▲