

# Destination Chile

From Relais & Chateaux luxury to family-run guest houses, Chile's hotel scene is more dynamic, and eclectic, than ever. Regular visitor Peter Richards MW recommends where to stay in the wine regions



Lapostolle Residence is at the premium end of the spectrum, but the scenery alone makes it worth the expense

EN ROUTE ROUND Chile in 1999, armed with a laptop, a leaky old BMW and a commission to write a tourist guide to Chilean wine country, I stopped at a hotel in a town called Vicuña. It was warm so I swiftly changed into my swimming trunks and, hurrying to the pool, asked the attendant if the water was cold. 'No, young man,' he said deliberately. 'The water's not cold.'

I jumped straight in. BOOM! I had never experienced such an all-encompassing sensation of intense cold in my life. It rent my senses. I roared out of the pool and sought an explanation from the attendant. The old man shrugged. 'It isn't cold,' came back the unhurried iteration. He turned to move away, so I'll never know if there was a look of glee or earnest indifference on his face when he added, exquisitely: 'It's freezing!'

Since I lived and worked in Chile for that glorious year, I've been lucky enough to return regularly (I'm at double figures and counting). It's been equally fascinating, frustrating and thrilling to observe the country over this time, rapid change counter-balanced by endemic conservatism. I remember writing in that tourist guide something along these lines: 'Chilean wineries recognise the potential in wine tourism but are cautious to act: it's as if they're on the edge of a cliff but waiting to be pushed, rather than jump.'

My pool attendant was a fine example of the Chilean mastery of the understatement, and perhaps it's understandable for a country so remote to be reticent when it comes to investing in costly infrastructure such as hotels and other tourist facilities. But some have recognised the great potential and attraction of Chile's extraordinary landscapes, delicious food (fresh fruit, vegetables and seafood are a delight here) and fine wines.

It is to be hoped that more are brave enough to follow suit. They can help open up Chilean wine country to visitors who might otherwise zoom straight off to the wonders of the Patagonian rock towers and Antarctic ice fields, or the breathless delights of the Atacama desert.

The overall trends are positive. In 2012, international tourist arrivals to Chile grew by 12% on the previous year, reaching nearly 3.5 million. The World Tourism Organisation identifies Chile as the fastest growing tourist destination in Latin America. Encouraging developments include the VIK winery retreat in Cachapoal, slated for launch next year, while Tabalí is also considering opening up guest facilities in the lunar landscapes of Limarí in the north.

## The hotels and regions

For most international visitors, the capital Santiago is the first port of call in Chile. To explore wine country, the options are then to head north (towards Aconcagua, Limarí and Elqui), west (towards Casablanca and San Antonio) or south (towards Cachapoal, Colchagua and Maule). For now, there are limited options for those heading north – the main developments in boutique hotels to date have been in the centre and south. As Maipo is the wine region that surrounds Santiago, it's the most logical place to start. >



Clockwise from left: Matetic's Hotel La Casona in San Antonio; Hotel Casablanca Spa & Wine in Casablanca; Hotel TerraViña in Colchagua; and Tabonkö's winemakers Andrés Sánchez and Daniella Gillmore in Maule

### Address book

**HOTEL CASA REAL (Maipo)**

US\$390-\$480  
www.santarita.com

**HOTEL LA CASONA, MATETIC (San Antonio)**

US\$250-\$360  
www.matetic.com

**HOTEL CASABLANCA SPA & WINE (Casablanca)**

US\$150-\$250  
www.hotelrutadelvino.cl

**HOTEL PLAZA SANTA CRUZ (Colchagua)**

US\$364 (double) www.hotelsantacruzplaza.cl

**LAPOSTOLLE RESIDENCE (Colchagua)**

US\$600 (double); \$780 (single) (inclusive packages)  
www.lapostolle.com

**HOTEL VIÑA LA PLAYA (Colchagua)**

US\$150-\$215 (ex tax)  
www.hotelvinalaplaya.cl

**HOTEL CASA SILVA (Colchagua)**

US\$205-\$310  
www.casasilva.cl

**HOTEL CASA DE CAMPO (Colchagua)**

US\$120-\$170  
www.hotelcasadecampo.cl

**HOTEL TERRAVIÑA (Colchagua)**

US\$140-\$295  
www.terravina.cl

**TABONKÖ (Maule)**

US\$180-\$200  
www.tabonko.cl  
NB: these are guide prices only, covering a range of options on a per-night basis, provided at the time of writing, and are subject to change.



Moving out of central Santiago, perhaps one of the best and most exclusive places to get a feel for Maipo's historic wine production is at Santa Rita's Casa Real Hotel (see box, right). Make no mistake: this is old-school Chile. Don't expect hi-tech installations or the latest in creature comforts. But the atmosphere is delightful in this well-preserved 19th-century estate house, with its airy colonial feel, high ceilings, wide verandas, sumptuous furnishings and creaky wooden floors. The facilities are more than adequate and the service attentive. As well as the historic *cal y canto* wine cellars at Santa Rita, other attractions include the excellent Andean Museum, garden park, café, wine shop and a restaurant with a story to tell (the basement reputedly served as refuge for patriot fighters during

*'There is a restaurant next door. We provide guests with a flashlight and our dog shows the way'* Anne Sorensen, Hotel TerraViña

the wars of independence). There are also plenty of other wineries nearby worth a visit too, such as Carmen, Antiyal and Pérez Cruz.

A foray west of the capital is very much *de rigueur* for the wine-minded visitor to Chile, given the excellent quality and increasing diversity of the wines from San Antonio and Casablanca. In the former can be found Matetic's Hotel la Casona, a seven-room, sensitive refurbishment of a 1900s estate house. It's a great place to get away from it all, within easy striking distance of the coast and in the beautiful, self-enclosed setting of the Rosario Valley, where Matetic practises organic and biodynamic farming to produce not only superb Syrah, but also succulent blueberries.

A horse, bike or walking trip round the valley is recommended, and you can also combine a visit here with a stay in one of Chile's most breathtaking natural parks. Wine & Nature is a six-day programme that takes advantage of shared ownership to link La Casona with Patagonia Camp in Torres del Paine (prices start from US\$2,350 per person, which includes accommodation in luxury lakeside yurts; go to [www.patagoniacamp.com](http://www.patagoniacamp.com) for more information).

Over the hills from Matetic is Hotel Casablanca Spa & Wine. This family-run, 12-room hotel is elegantly proportioned and, as well as a sauna, hot tub and heated pool, offers grape-based 'bio-active' treatments featuring both bath and facial options. The hotel can also point you in the direction of local producers, of which there are many – its recommendations include Kingston, Montsecano, Casas del Bosque, Bodegas RE, Loma Larga and Quintay. And if you want to visit the historic port city Valparaíso, then Casa Higuera (www.casahiguera.cl), perched on the hillside with excellent views, is a sound option. Both Valparaíso and Casablanca were recently voted into the Great Wine Capitals Global Network, joining the likes of Bilbao/Rioja and Bordeaux.

### To the south

Moving south, Colchagua is by far the best equipped of Chile's wine regions for visitors. This is partly the result of investment by local magnate Carlos Cardoen, who has set up various enterprises based around the valley's informal capital Santa Cruz. These include the impressive Hotel Plaza Santa Cruz (hardly boutique at 116 rooms, but deserving of a mention), a casino, two museums (including one devoted to cars) and Viña Santa Cruz over the hills in Lolol, complete with cable cars, mini observatory for star-gazing and recreations of indigenous tribal settlements.

There are several boutique wine hotels in Colchagua, perhaps the most impressive being the Lapostolle Residence, a luxurious and beautifully equipped Relais & Chateaux eyrie on the south-facing amphitheatre that is Apalta, a stone's throw from the stunning deconstructed barrel design of the winery. Those of an active disposition can choose from cookery classes, horse or mountain-bike rides, hikes, massages and the infinity pool. Prices are as steep as the hillsides here, but the standard is correspondingly high.

Somewhat more traditional is the Hotel Viña La Playa in the west of Colchagua, and linked to Viña Sutil. While the wines may not be the best in the valley, and the location remote, the 11-room hotel is well appointed and tranquil, with its own landing strip, restaurant, pool and varied programmes, from sensory tastings to hot-air balloon trips.

Other options in Colchagua include Casa Silva's elegantly rendered boutique hotel and restaurant (complete with polo pitch) in the accessible eastern end of the valley near San Fernando, and the spacious and laid-back Hotel Casa de Campo, just outside Santa Cruz. Also in the centre of the valley, located in the vineyard of Laura Hartwig Winery, is Hotel TerraViña, run by a Danish/Chilean couple. Though it's only a B&B, co-owner Anne Sorensen says: 'There are plenty of restaurants around us, and one next door, a short walk through the vineyard. We provide guests with a flashlight and our dog shows the way.' Wineries to visit in Colchagua include Lapostolle, Montes, Emiliana Orgánico, Villalobos, Casa Silva, Cono Sur, Viu Manent, Luis Felipe Edwards and Polkura.

Southern Chile is particularly exciting at the moment. A significant revival of old vines (Maule,

### Where to stay in the capital

Santiago is often dismissed as a smog-ridden, traffic-choked city to be traversed as quickly as possible. This is a mistake. The capital has cleaned up its act in recent years and offers much for the visitor to see, if you can spare a day or two.

There is a wide range of places to stay in Santiago, from basic B&Bs to top-dollar hotels by the usual international names. The following are recommended as places with a bit of character and which might appeal to wine lovers.

■ **W Santiago (Las Condes)** Trendy, sizeable, bedecked with various restaurants and lounges and a sauna,

this elegant five-star hotel also has a wine-tasting room and an El Mundo del Vino wine shop. US\$285-\$790; [www.starwoodhotels.com](http://www.starwoodhotels.com)

■ **The Aubrey (Bellavista)** Australian/English owned, The Aubrey has 15 en-suite rooms and a spa, with elegant architecture and a bijou feel. US\$240-\$550; [www.theaubrey.com](http://www.theaubrey.com)

■ **Noi (Vitacura)** Elegant, imaginative decor with a healthy accent on fine food and drink. US\$309-\$1,109; [www.noivitacura.cl](http://www.noivitacura.cl)

■ **Hotel Galerías (downtown)** Linked to the Almacruz empire of local magnate Carlos Cardoen (see text). US\$156-\$444; [www.hotelgalerias.cl](http://www.hotelgalerias.cl)



Above: horse riding in the Apalta sub-region of Colchagua is just one of the activities on offer at Relais & Chateaux's Lapostolle Residence, which also features a stunning winery

Itata and Bío Bío were some of the first regions put to vine by Europeans in the 16th century) and exploration of new varieties and terroirs have re-energised the area. Notable wineries here include Erasmo (Reserva de Caliboro), Gillmore and Ribera del Lago.

Tourism infrastructure has been slow to catch up, but one boutique wine guest house worth flagging up is Tabonkö. Run by husband-and-wife winemakers Andrés Sánchez and Daniella Gillmore, and open from September to April, this handsome copper-and-wood hotel is located in splendid rural isolation at the Gillmore winery in the Loncomilla Valley (Maule). Despite the creature comforts, including jacuzzis and king-size beds, nature takes centre stage – from the vibrant wines to the wine therapies, beautiful surroundings and local fauna: native animals such as pudus, alpacas and ñandus wander around the site freely, and there's also a small zoo. If nothing else, the night-time noises are something different. **D**

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