

## RED HOT CHILE

*Upmarket adventure, eye-opening experiences, fabulous food and a burgeoning wine culture - Chile's bounty is both unexpected and delightful.*

Words by **Joanna Tovia**

Stretching more than 4000 kilometres north to south, but only averaging around 180km wide, this long, skinny country has a spirit all of its own. The Andes mountain range separates Chile from the rest of South America, so its character and customs differ to those of neighbouring Argentina, Peru and Bolivia. Chilean people are sincere and friendly and this beautiful country offers an array of experiences as diverse as its geography. As unprepared as I am for its contrasts, I can't get enough of the surprises that lie in wait at every turn.

We fly into the capital, Santiago, where more than a third of Chile's 17 million people live. Nestled between the towering snow-capped Andes and the Coastal mountain range, cosmopolitan Santiago is the perfect city in which to base yourself if you're short on time. There are three high-end ski resorts within two hours' drive of Santiago and the Pacific Ocean is only 120 kilometres away. Between these two extremes is a world-class wine region well worth exploring.

Santiago is a big city in terms of population, but it doesn't have the luxury of urban sprawl. As numbers have grown, it has become more built up. As one of the most seismic countries in the world, Chile has had to work with Mother Nature as it has grown; there are around 500 active volcanoes in Chile and the last big earthquake, in 2010, had a magnitude of 8.8.

When I ask our guide when Santiago last felt the earth move, she shrugs with nonchalance – there was a tremor three days ago. Magnitude four and five earthquakes are common here, she says, and all new buildings are designed to be quake proof. Unless an earthquake registers eight on the Richter scale, not even the subway stops operating.

Despite the modern architecture, there are some older buildings still standing, including our boutique hotel, Lastarria, built in 1927. Brimming with soul and style, this former house makes you feel instantly at home. Our divine digs set the tone for the rest of the trip. With luxury tour specialists Abercrombie & Kent our hosts, the accommodation, experiences, and gastronomy are a cut above throughout our Chilean adventure.

We dine at the ultramodern W hotel in Las Condes, one of Santiago's most fashionable neighbourhoods – the property is home to upscale restaurant Osaka, serving Peruvian and Asian delicacies. Be sure to book ahead: like many restaurants in Santiago, it's closed on Sundays. The hotel attracts the likes of Bono and Beyoncé, and it's easy to see why. The rooftop terrace by a pool heated to Jacuzzi-like temperatures overlooks the city, the rooms are uber-cool and the nightclub is an A-list hotspot.

The Red Skeleton is apparently one of the other standout hotels in Santiago. The Red Skeleton? Really? We soon realise that adjusting to heavily accented English will take time. When our guide says Red Skeleton, she means the Ritz-Carlton.

### AMONG THE VINES

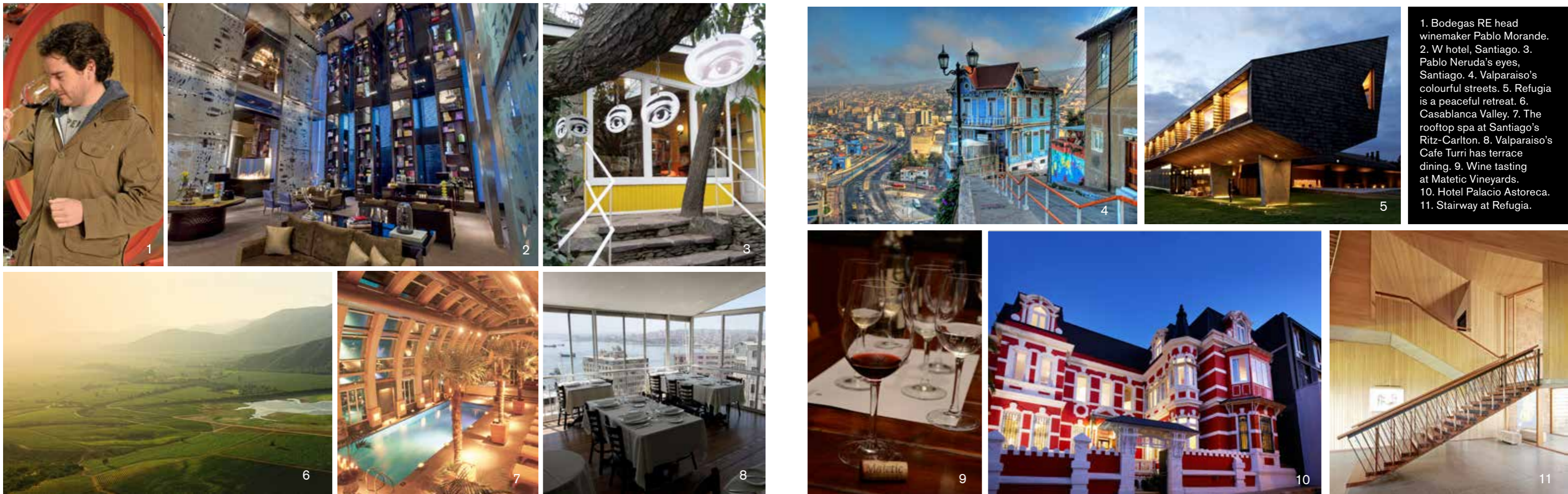
A short drive west of the city and we arrive in the Casablanca wine region, a fertile valley that has been making its mark on the international scene since a group of Chilean winemakers took a gamble and planted vines here about 25 years ago.

Chile's winemaking is of course much older than this – its mild, Mediterranean climate and rich soils are ideal for grape growing. But Casablanca's proximity to the coast and the frosts that come with that made it an unlikely prospect. Winemakers soon discovered, however, that the Coastal range created something of a micro-climate in Casablanca, affording them the ability to make deliciously different wines unlike anything Chile had ever produced. The frosts are countered with the use of large fans – and sometimes even helicopters – to keep the air moving.

At Bodegas RE, a winemaking newcomer, the goal is to reinvent wine and rediscover techniques used 6000 years ago. Just five wines are produced at this boutique estate and they are aged in ancient clay tanks and oak barrels. Head winemaker Pablo Morande's favourite is a 70/30 mix of shiraz and pinot noir.

"It's like a white wine that tastes red," he says, giving us a taste directly from the barrel. "We take some liberties here to create some new-world wines with the concept of reviving ancient techniques." You won't find screw caps here – it's all wax and corks. The 2008 carignan is delightful and the 2011

Chile's Mediterranean climate and rich soils are ideal for winemaking, and the unique wines produced are making a mark on the international stage.



1. Bodegas RE head winemaker Pablo Morande. 2. W hotel, Santiago. 3. Pablo Neruda's eyes, Santiago. 4. Valparaiso's colourful streets. 5. Refugia is a peaceful retreat. 6. Casablanca Valley. 7. The rooftop spa at Santiago's Ritz-Carlton. 8. Valparaiso's Cafe Turri has terrace dining. 9. Wine tasting at Matetic Vineyards. 10. Hotel Palacio Astoreca. 11. Stairway at Refugia.

55/45 chardonnay-pinot noir is an easy drinking option Morande describes as “like sparkling wine without the bubbles”.

Matetic Vineyards, the next winery we visit, is a much larger affair. This certified organic, biodynamic vineyard is the real deal and much thought goes into treating the property as one living entity. Cows are used for meat and their manure for compost, alpacas are used to control weeds, the grape skins and seeds are turned into compost to enrich the soil and vines are planted according to the cycles of the moon.

Around 480,000 bottles are produced here every year and wine is exported to more than 30 countries. River stones lining the walls provide natural insulation as wines age in French oak. Once neat and uniform, the stone walls now have a wavy appearance thanks to the 2010 earthquake.

Head sommelier Joseline Plaza explains where in our mouths and nose we will feel and taste the flavours of each wine she pours. The pepper in the 2010 shiraz, for example, is felt down both sides of your nose rather than merely tasted.

We stay on-site at La Casona, a gorgeous seven-room boutique hotel with views over the vineyards, lake and gardens. It's both cosy and elegant, and the friendly service provides that feel-good factor that makes a stay memorable.

In the dining room, we learn the life story of “James Bond”, our waiter, who spoils us with not only amazing wines but also with a three-course meal that gives us a taste of the culinary treats to come throughout Chile. I take a supremely peaceful early-morning horse ride through the rolling paddocks and rows of well-tended vines, before setting off on our next adventure.

### COLOUR AND CHARACTER

“To feel the love of people whom we love is a fire that feeds our life,” wrote Pablo Neruda, who died in 1973, and our next stop is this famous poet's hometown.

Valparaiso is a small, higgledy-piggledy city of colour and character that was one of the most important ports in South America before the creation of the Panama Canal.

The winding old streets, wall art and buildings painted in vibrant hues of green, yellow, pink, blue and purple earned it the honour of a World Heritage listing in 2003 and it's a fun place to explore on foot. You'll come across many happy, well-fed stray dogs strolling about – just be careful where you step.

Rickety inclinators rattle you up or down the steep hillside for less than a dollar – these, too, are heritage listed and there are 30 in the city. Neruda's house is one of many perched on the hillside – his onetime home is now a museum revealing his life and quirky personality.

There are plenty of cafes to choose from for lunch, most offering the classic South American pisco sour – a tart but tasty cocktail.

Café Turri's terrace dining affords great views but I'm baffled with the choice of music – Billy's Idol's “White Wedding”. The 1980s remains a popular decade in South America when it comes to music, I realise over the next two weeks, and such relics as inline skating are still in vogue.

Valparaiso adjoins the popular beachfront holiday destination Vina del Mar, which is a little like the Gold Coast but without the great beaches. We stay at the Hotel Palacio

Astoreca, a bright red reconfigured 1920s-era Victorian mansion in the most interesting part of town. The rooms are tastefully adorned, there's a *hammam* (Turkish steam bath) and hot tub heated with firewood and the restaurant offers imaginative haute cuisine.

### ECO REFUGE

That Chile is a land of contrasts becomes glaringly obvious on arrival at the island of Chiloé, a short flight from Valparaiso. The lush, green hills, fishing villages and misty waters make you feel like you're in Scotland but when we arrive at Refugia, a 12-room boutique hotel sitting on a peninsula overlooking the water, I realise I'm in a place unlike anywhere I've ever been.

Eco-friendly Refugia was lovingly constructed by the island's ship builders using rare timber and skills passed down from father to son for generations.

It is an architectural marvel that makes the most of its position facing the ocean. Inside, glass along the length of the building reveals uninterrupted views of the grassy headland and water beyond.

I'm awe-struck with the beauty of Refugia and I haven't even seen my room yet.

Our sprightly hospitality manager Maria Jose is instantly likeable, and not just for the champagne, mussels and chorizo nibbles she invites us to enjoy by the fire on arrival. She greets us like old friends and explains that anyone who stays longer than two nights does feel like family to her. Some nights, she may even join you for dinner.

Hand-carved wooden pigs to sit on elicit a smile, as does the rest of the décor: sheepskin rugs inviting you to sit on the stairs, a “vase” of wooden farming tools and intimate nooks with telescopes to while away the hours gazing at the sea. Thought has gone into every detail.

The rooms are havens of peace and beauty with picture windows overlooking the water. A pair of hand-knitted slippers sits on the bed as a welcome gift and each room has its own Jacuzzi.

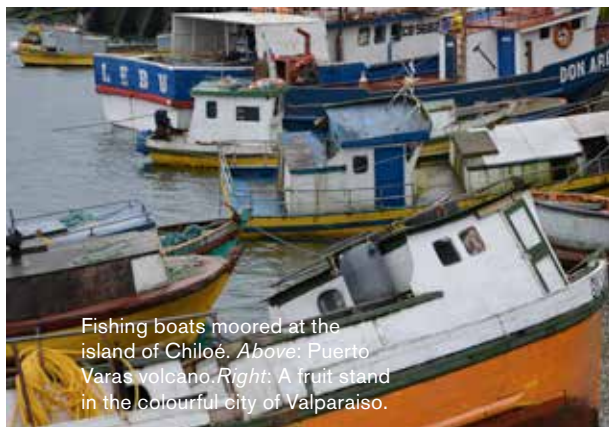
The outdoor seating area beside a roaring fire is a great spot to gather in the evening after a day out hiking, canoeing, horseriding or exploring the nearby islands.

We take a two-hour walk before dinner in gumboots and raincoats along the waterfront and back along the road past small farms and green fields, dogs and chickens. One farmer we meet outside his simple wooden cottage is a rustic, friendly type with a ruddy face and heavy woollen jumper. When his mobile phone rings, though, the spell is broken and we walk on.

The next day we drive to the fishing village of Mechuque, and this really is like stepping back in time. There is no electricity in the town – a generator operates between 4pm and midnight, and the shingled homes are weatherbeaten.

As interesting as it is to amble about, it's cold and rainy so when we board our own fishing boat, built over two years in the same style as the hotel, the warmth is welcome.

We are plied with brie, salmon and walnuts along with drinks of our choice before visiting another island. There, ▶



Fishing boats moored at the island of Chiloé. Above: Puerto Varas volcano. Right: A fruit stand in the colourful city of Valparaiso.

## HOT SPOTS

**Santiago** Mingle with the A-crowd at W hotel ([starwoodhotels.com](http://starwoodhotels.com)) or opt for Lastarria ([lastarriahotel.com](http://lastarriahotel.com)).

**Chiloé** Go directly to the wonderful Hotel Refugia ([refugia.cl](http://refugia.cl)).

**Puerto Varas** Stay at the lakeside Hotel Cumbres. ([hotelescumbres.cl](http://hotelescumbres.cl)).

**Casablanca** Stay at Hotel La Casona de Matetic Vineyards for wine tasting in beautiful surrounds ([matetic.com](http://matetic.com)).

**Valparaiso** The Palacio Astoreca is in a central location ([hotelpalacioastoreca.com](http://hotelpalacioastoreca.com)).

### GETTING THERE

Luxury tour specialist Abercrombie & Kent designs itineraries in Chile, throughout South America, and beyond. ([abercrombiekent.com.au](http://abercrombiekent.com.au)).

LAN Airlines operates six one-stop flights a week from Sydney to Santiago with onward connections to more than 80 South American destinations. LAN also offers non-stop flights between Sydney and Santiago ([lan.com](http://lan.com)).

we learn about the local history and clamber into a rowboat to watch a father-and-son mussel farming team at work.

Kayaks are available for a paddle and fishing for rainbow trout is an option.

With such a long coastline, it's no surprise Chile does seafood so well. For lunch on the boat, however, it's simple but delicious traditional fare: roast beef, onion gratin and sweet potatoes. And for dessert? Brownies and chocolate torte with cranberries. I'm in heaven.

Back at Refugia for dinner, we start with clam and white wine stew and cornmeal bites with smoked pork. The salmon ceviche is the best I've ever had, and the blood orange sausage with walnuts and lemon, orange and grapefruit is a taste sensation.

Don't even get me started on the next night's offerings, which include a perfectly seasoned potato soup with leek and bacon; an ideal choice after an exciting but wet and chilly day out.

Refugia came to life in the imagination of general manager Andrés Bravari Gambino, a former engineer who wanted to leave city life behind and move with his wife and three curly-headed boys to the quiet beauty of Chiloé.

After coming up with the idea for Refugia, one of the owners of the construction company where he was employed agreed to fund the project and they worked on planning it for two years. His idea: a small, eco-friendly, all-inclusive hotel that blended into the environment and local culture.

"Here in the hotel or on the excursions, you can breathe peace and calm inside and outside the hotel," Gambino says.

"I'm very proud. The looks on the faces of the people is really

special and most people say thank you for the experience – that makes me think, yes, it was a good idea."

Visit the local markets of Castro on your way to the airport for chocolates, hand-knitted jumpers and hats. Like the rest of Chiloé, there's nothing touristy about these markets – it's where the locals shop and offers a fascinating insight into their culture.

### NATURAL WONDERS

Another quick flight and we land in Puerto Montt, the capital of Chile's lake district. We stop in at Feria Artesanal de Angelmo, a maze of little shops and stalls selling locally made jewellery, fine knitwear and handicrafts, before the short drive to Puerto Varas, a lovely town on the shore of Lago Llanquihue.

Puerto Varas is a gateway to breathtaking national parks offering outdoor adventures in the form of white-water rafting, horse riding, kayaking and fishing.

Cumbres Patagonicas is a giant hotel, but its size does not mean it lacks character. Situated on the edge of the lake with stunning views, this hotel offers luxurious quarters, a sumptuous breakfast buffet and standout service.

We go on a bushwalk to see the mighty Petrohue glacial rapids as they crash through lava channels formed by Volcan Osorno's 1850 eruption and even climb up part of the volcano. Crunching through vast tracts of black volcanic gravel past snow drifts and little else is a surreal experience a little like being on another planet. Wear good hiking boots for grip and don't look down!