

Blooming Valley

With a dramatic setting, great wines, and unheralded food and art scenes, the Chilean capital of Santiago is a city on the rise. Here are five reasons to visit.

Text Mark Johanson

Santiago is a city of seven million people, all sandwiched together in a sun-drenched valley between the towering Andes Mountains and the rolling Chilean Coastal Range. Whenever you're lost, as I often am here (despite relocating from the US four years ago), all you need to know is that the east lies towards the Andes, the highest mountains in the world outside Asia. Santiago and its bashful citizens have long sat in the shadows of these mountains looming above, but I've witnessed in recent years how my adopted home has rapidly emerged from a decades-long slumber to become a hub of innovation with a burgeoning start-up scene, a growing entrepreneurial spirit and trendy new areas to match. As the capital of South America's most prosperous country, Santiago boasts many elements its neighbours lack, including modern infrastructure and a comprehensive public transportation network. It also regularly ranks as the safest city on the continent. Add in new infusions of art, culture and gastronomy, and you can begin to see why Santiago is winning over visitors.

1 Better parks, better views

When I first visited Santiago as a tourist seven years ago, my long-time Chilean friend Carla Andrade told me: "There's no better viewpoint of the city than the one atop Cerro San Cristóbal." We huffed up this hill together under a blazing afternoon sun. It's a sweaty 4km hike that's no longer necessary thanks to the city's revamped cable car system, which debuted in late 2016. Its cabins (47 in total) now glide above the massive 7.22km² Santiago Metropolitan Park all the way to the top.

As I ride up San Cristóbal on another sunny afternoon in 2018, the skyscrapers of the city's glittering business district fade into the background like a glass castle smashed up against the snow-capped Andes. All the while, the open arms of a 22m Virgin Mary statue beckon me forward until, at long last, I depart from the cabin at her base.

Below the statue lies a plaza packed with vendors selling *mote con huesillo* (a sweet drink of peach juice and husked wheat). I do as the locals do and slurp the unexpected combination as I lean over the edge of San Cristóbal to take in the view. To the west lies the old Santiago, home to the historic Plaza de Armas, stately Neoclassical government buildings and working-class apartment blocks. The city gets progressively newer (and socioeconomically richer) the further east I look towards the Andes, where glass-encased towers – including the tallest building in Latin America, Gran Torre Santiago – embody the modern face Santiago wants to show to the world.

I forgo the cable car on the way down and opt instead to drop into the bohemian Bellavista neighbourhood via San Cristóbal's 93-year-old funicular. The rickety carriage sputters its way downhill at a 45-degree incline. As soon as it clicks into the station at the bottom, I'm off to explore Santiago's booming arts scene.

2 Burgeoning art hub

The facades of Bellavista's bustling bars and restaurants are all covered in elaborate street murals; some made in protest of the government, others to praise local heroes like poet and diplomat Pablo Neruda. This colourful graffiti has long been the face of Chilean art, at least for tourists. But where Chile really shines is with its performing arts.

"In Chile, there is a great freedom for artists to create," explains Felipe Bascuñán, brand manager at Municipal de Santiago, the city's ornate Neoclassical opera house. As we explore its marbled lobby, I learn of forthcoming plans to make this the most eco-friendly heritage building in South America, as well as the staging of a brand new opera, *El Cristo de Elqui* – based on the novels of the Chilean writer Hernán Rivera Letelier – which Bascuñán says is a must-see.

A few blocks away, Centro Cultural Gabriela Mistral (GAM) also has big plans for 2018. It currently shows cutting-edge contemporary >

Previous pages: sunrise over the Andes and Santiago (left); a proud owner of a specialist wine store in Santiago (right).

Right page, clockwise from top left: the city's central square, Plaza de Armas, boasts a refreshing mix of both old and new architecture, with the historic Metropolitan Cathedral of Santiago on the left; fresh produce at one of the many lively markets; the town is a true delight for street-art aficionados.



It's become a hub of innovation, with a growing entrepreneurial spirit



Getty Images (top), Jamie Beck (bottom left and right)

The arts scene is in the midst of a renaissance



Hollandse Hoogte (top), Matthew Williams-Ellis (bottom right), Gabriel O'Renke (bottom left)

Clockwise from top right: Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes; colourful buildings in the Bellavista area; the patio of Café de la Candelaria.

theatre and dance within a striking copper-encased building with five stages, and in the second half of the year, it will unveil a new 1,880-seat Grand Hall. Santiago has welcomed a number of other new venues in recent years, including high-end CorpArtes, a sleek and moneyed space for touring acts, and edgy NAVE, where artists-in-residence stage experimental performances.

“While other Latin American countries tend to focus on traditional expressions of art, Chile champions innovation above all else,” Bascuñán tells me, adding that “Santiago’s arts scene, as a whole, is in the midst of a renaissance”.

3 Rise of Chilean cuisine

To explore Santiago’s booming gastronomy scene, Bascuñán recommends I travel east to Providencia, where he lives. Once a humdrum upper middle-class neighbourhood on the edge of Santiago Centro, the area has blossomed in recent years into the city’s culinary core, with a flurry of new restaurant openings from the city’s top chefs.

One of its brightest stars, 99 Restaurante, shot up the renowned list of Latin America’s 50 Best Restaurants from number 46 – when it debuted in 2015 – to number 14 in 2017 thanks to its playful reinterpretation of Chilean classics like *pastel de jaiba*. While most restaurants in town offer this traditional crab casserole in a ceramic bowl, 99 serves it on an ice-lolly stick.

I sit at one of the four wood-hewn tables inside, so I can watch chef Kurt Schmidt in the open kitchen as he preps tasting plates for a nine-course meal. “I feel responsible to show people the marvellous products we have in Chile, from the Atacama Desert to Patagonia,” the 35-year-old enthuses. “I want them to have made a journey across the country by the time they’ve finished their meal and to have tried ingredients they’ve never encountered before.” These include tiny clams endemic to the southerly Chiloé Archipelago and an orange-white mushroom from the central forests.

Schmidt says that Chile’s vast diversity of climates, and 4,270km of coastline, make it one of the world’s greatest natural pantries.

Chileans are said to consume 90kg of bread per person, per year, mostly in sandwiches. To get my fix, I grab a table at 17°56° the following morning. The menu at this open-air eatery is divided by latitude, with five different sandwiches representing separate regions of Chile. I’m feeling nostalgic from my trip up to the Atacama Desert a few months back, so I opt for Paralelo 17°, a sandwich inspired by Chile’s far north, with quinoa-crusting fish, a tapenade of olives from the Azapa Valley and *huacatay* sauce on ciabatta bread. The crunchiness of the battered fish pairs perfectly with the saltiness of the olives and the bite of the sauce.

The final stop on my Providencia food tour is Piso Uno. Part tapas restaurant, part lounge (with high ceilings, geometric chandeliers and rotating DJs), it’s the latest venture from chef José Ozaki. He has a Chilean mother, Peruvian father and Japanese grandparents. He tells me – as we guzzle handcrafted cocktails at the long white bar – that it was only natural that he would dedicate himself to cooking Nikkei (Japanese-Peruvian) cuisine “with a Chilean twist”. His dishes – including tuna tataki in ponzu sauce with a cream of rocoto peppers and crispy quinoa – mix the clean lines and salty flavours of Japan with the bounty of Chile and the spices of Peru. It’s a wild combination to be sure, but each dish explodes like a flavour bomb in my mouth.

4 Trendy shopping

Santiago’s ‘It’ neighbourhood right now is definitely Barrio Italia, where historic one-level homes have found new lives as art galleries, bookstores, hipster coffee shops and labyrinthine shopping arcades with indie boutiques the size of walk-in closets.

“Little by little, this neighbourhood has positioned itself as a place for independent designers and innovators who want to demonstrate that Chile can make products of the highest quality,” explains Javiera >

Places to eat

99 Restaurante

Every meal at this intimate eatery promises a culinary journey across Chile. Come for a casual three-course lunch or a more sophisticated six- or nine-course dinner.
99restaurante.com
 Andrés de Fuenzalida 99

Piso Uno

With DJs spinning records, inventive Nikkei tapas and customised cocktails, this slick new restobar is one of the hippest spots in town.
Facebook: pisounorestaurant
 Santa Magdalena 116

17°56°

Every item at this casual restaurant and sandwich shop is inspired by a Chilean latitude, from the quinoa and altiplanic potatoes of the Atacama desert to wild boar and sweet potatoes from the Lakes District.
1756cocinaybar.cl
 Andrés de Fuenzalida 48

Places to drink

Dr Jekyll

This hidden laboratory of mixology boasts more than 300 bottles from which to craft cocktails. Check Facebook for the password and be prepared for a lavish room with chandeliers, antique furnishings and theatrical curios.
Facebook: drjekyllspeakeasy
 Avenida Peru 631

El Honesto Mike

Finding 20 craft beers on tap is a rare find in Santiago, but this new beer bar is a sign that Chile is no longer exclusively a wine country. Pair your beers with juicy, American-style burgers as you slink into one of the booths.
 Avenida Los Leones 96

Places to stay

The Singular

Stay in this high-end hotel and enjoy sweeping city views from the rooftop pool, grab a pisco sour at the art-filled bar or explore the restaurants of the surrounding Lastarria area.
thesingular.com
 Merced 294

Luciano K

This stylish boutique hotel is housed in a 1920s building that was once the tallest in Santiago (with the city's first lift).
lucianokhotel.com
 Merced 84

CasaSur Charming Hotel

This beloved six-room guesthouse is a minimalist haven of peace, tranquillity and personalised service.
casasurchile.com
 Eduardo Hyatt 527

Things to do

Centro Cultural Gabriela Mistral

Chile's top contemporary dance and theatre companies perform in this copper-encased cultural centre. You'll also find rotating art exhibitions and regular craft fairs in the courtyard here.
gam.cl
 Avenida Libertador Bernardo O'Higgins 227

Municipal de Santiago

Chile's most prestigious venue, this ornate Neoclassical building houses its own ballet, opera and orchestra companies.
municipal.cl
 Agustinas 794

Paseo Estación Italia

Your one-stop-shop for creative souvenirs, from handcrafted shoes or sunglasses to ceramic bowls or Chilean graphic novels.
estacionitalia.cl
 Avenida Italia 1439
 Avenida Condell 1438

Wines and Barrels

A day tour from Santiago to the small-scale wine producers in the Maipo, Casablanca or Colchagua valleys.
winesandbarrels.com

Gómez, co-owner of Bacinari, a shop that sells colourful men's shoes that are made in the country using local leather and Chilean designs. "Old *casonas* (large houses) have been restored and converted into commercial galleries, but they still maintain the history and essence of the neighbourhood."

The Santiago I first moved to in 2014 was a city that bulldozed over anything historic and looked outward to the US and Europe for inspiration. Barrio Italia exemplifies the new Santiago that's proud to be Chilean. A 'made-in-Chile' ethos is evident all across the neighbourhood as I stroll past designers selling backpacks (Rebeca), sunglasses (Fibra Eyewear), Patagonian textiles (Lynch Deco) and pattern-heavy shirts (By Danny Tejada). I also stop at a bean-to-bar chocolate factory, Óbolo Chocolate, and peruse shelves of Chilean beers, wines and olive oils at Despensa 1893.

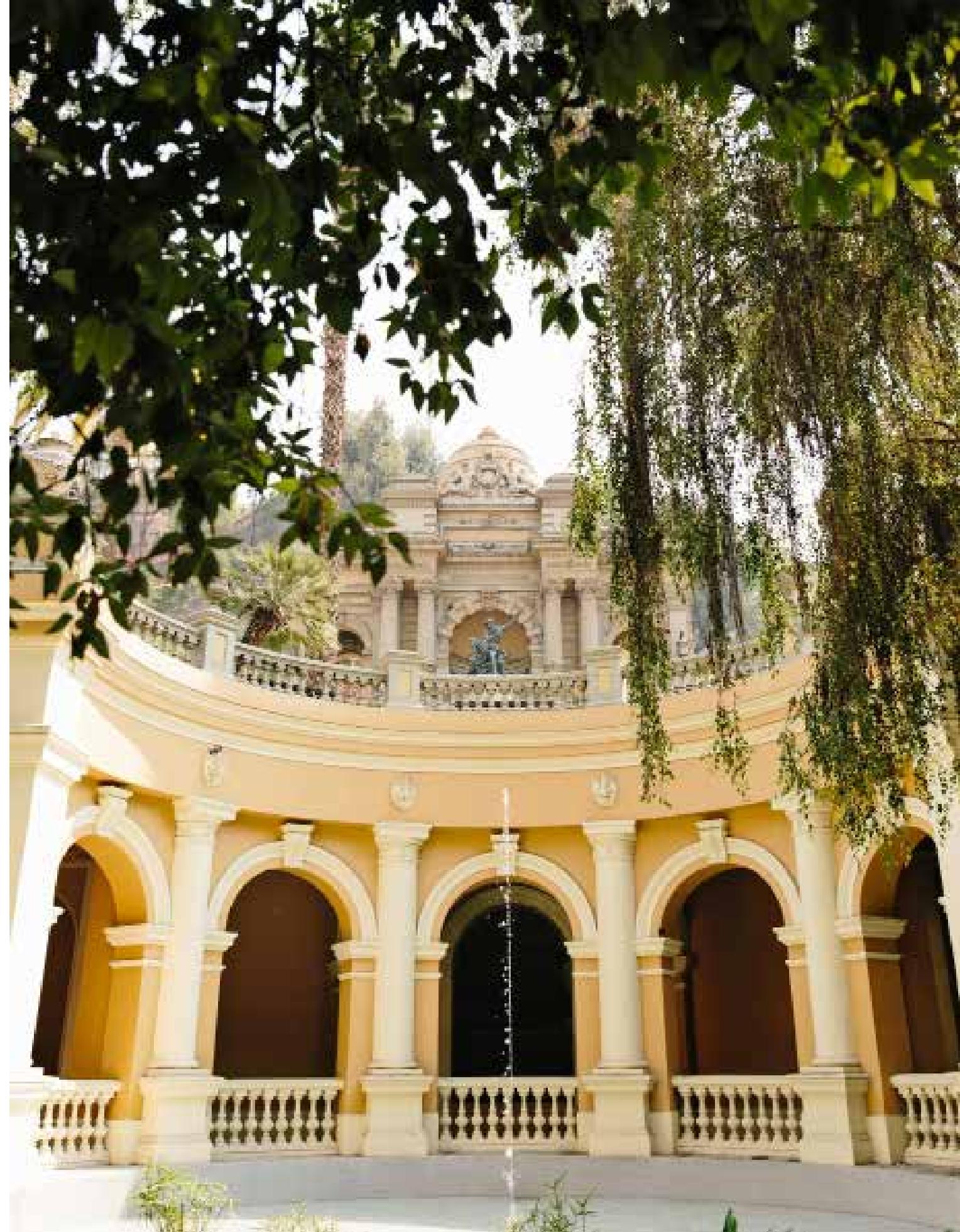
Despite its rapid gentrification, Barrio Italia still retains much of its blue-collar charm. Some of my favourite restaurants here lie door-to-door with auto detailers and furniture workshops, where men in coveralls puff cigarettes while buffing grandiose antiques.

5 New faces of Chilean wine

Most bottles of Chilean wine that make their way out of the country come from large factory wineries, but there are dozens of boutique producers on Santiago's edge who are completely breaking the mould, favouring quality above quantity. To find them, I enlist the help of Gonzalo Moraga of Wines and Barrels, a Santiago-based tour operator.

"I love to prove to visitors that Chilean wine is not what they think it is," Moraga explains as the towers of Santiago give way to the emerald vines of the Maipo Valley. "Chilean wine has a reputation for being *bueno, bonito y barato* (good, nice and cheap). It's thought of as safe, but uninspiring, and that's unfortunate."

To prove his point, Moraga takes me to Hoops by Caviahue, where a British-Chilean >



- 1 San Cristóbal Hill
- 2 Plaza de Armas
- 3 Estación Funicular Pío Nono
- 4 Gran Torre Santiago
- 5 Centro Cultural Gabriela Mistral
- 6 NAVE cultural centre
- 7 Piso Uno restobar
- 8 Barrio Italia area
- 9 99 Restaurante
- 10 Hotel Luciano K



Jasmin Evans/Art Associates

A 'made-in-Chile' ethos is evident everywhere



Alamy (bottom left and right), 500px/Qatsi Fisher (top)

Left page, clockwise from top right: the Supreme Court of Chile; seafood stall at Mercado Central; San Cristóbal Hill's 93-year-old funicular.

couple produces an extremely limited-production Bordeaux blend from the 626 vines grown in the front yard of their Talagante estate. I feel like a true VIP as we taste a rare bottle from 2010 and compare it with the 2016 and 2017 vintages (still aging in oak barrels) to see how the vintages reflect the unique climatic conditions of each year. I find the 2010 earthy and complex with a long finish, while the 2016 is soft and subtle.

Next, it's off to the venerable Colchagua Valley and Viña Escondida, a 100,000m² vineyard hidden behind a ring of eucalyptus trees. This boutique winery specialises in floral and heavy-hitting Cabernet Sauvignons, which pair perfectly with the steaks and sausages I eat straight from the grill at the on-site restaurant, El Clandestino. The winery lies on the site of a 1930s brothel, and bottle labels pay homage to the brothel's most infamous patrons. I buy two bottles, as much for the wine as the design.

Viña Tipaume, in the sun-kissed Andean foothills of the nearby Cachapoal Valley, is the final and most experimental winery of the day. It's also my personal favourite. This artisan family vineyard not only makes biodynamic wines using organic farming methods, but it ages most of its wines in clay amphoras. As I taste them in the stone-hewn wine cellar, I note that this technique gives them a fresher and more natural finish. The vines here are

all ungrafted, co-planted and co-fermented, with Chile's signature grape, Carménère, forming the bulk of production, followed by Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Lacryma Christi, Viognier and Malbec. Viña Tipaume – like many of Santiago's newer businesses – represents a true paradigm shift from the conventional to the unexpected.

Forward-thinking Santiago is certainly not the same city I first visited seven years ago, and it won't be the same city it is today next year. Change is in the air, and if my brief tour of the new Santiago has proved anything, it's that the road ahead is full of fantastic surprises. ■

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