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# The Most Underrated City in South America: Santiago, Chile

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For connoisseurs of chaos, Santiago can be hard to fall in love with. The city doesn't immediately seduce with gorgeously crumbling buildings or frissons of danger. It's the most orderly of Latin American capitals.

Rather, Santiago's appeal unfolds slowly. Founded in 1541, the city of about 5 million still has some of its 19<sup>th</sup> century neoclassical architecture, mixed with modern glass-and-steel high-rises (including the tallest in South America) designed to withstand Chile's frequent earthquakes. Its culture is a mix of the traditional and the new as well, as a young creative class is gaining influence, immigration is making the population (and cuisine) more diverse, and the theater and restaurant scenes are blossoming.

"Living in a country like this, it's like watching a child grow up. The city is evolving in dog years," says American-born travel designer Liz Caskey, who has lived in Santiago since 2001, trained there as a sommelier, and [now organizes custom trips](#) through Chile, Argentina, Uruguay and Peru, typically with a food and wine focus.

As with any big city, the trick to enjoying Santiago is finding the right neighborhoods. Lastarria is effortlessly charming, with its low-slung neoclassical buildings and cobblestone streets, where jewelry vendors hold court until well into the night. For several years now, it has been bustling with sidewalk cafes, cute restaurants, antique flea markets, cool hotels, boutiques, galleries and art cinemas.

Emerging now is Barrio Italia, which Caskey says is becoming the Palermo of Santiago (a reference to the coolest neighborhood in Buenos Aires), an old neighborhood with a funky vibe and young designers setting up shop. There's a particular emphasis on home wares, and lots of design collectives that showcase the work of many artisans under one roof. They're worth a visit for inspiration alone.

After years of aspiring to international style, designers are celebrating Chilean heritage and materials. A standout among them is 26-year-old Ignacia Murtagh, whose elegant ceramics turn stone shapes into poetry. Her china gives traditional Mapuche shapes a Jonathan Adler sensibility, and her Los Andes tables will be shown at the International Contemporary Furniture Fair this week in New York, then sold through American furniture manufacturer Bernhardt Design. Third-generation jeweler Claudia Betancourt and Nano Pulgar, the partners in Walka,

have become a formidable player in the art jewelry world, thanks to designs that play with traditional Chilean crafts like the horsehair-weaving technique known as crin.

Santiago is also rich in chic, homegrown boutique hotels, with three or four more in the works. For now (and probably longer) the cool kid in town is the new [Singular Santiago](#), the urban counterpart to the Singular Patagonia, the most design-forward lodge in that region. (I stayed as a guest of the hotel.) The city hotel mixes the building's neoclassical French architecture with early-20<sup>th</sup>-century style. The rooms are spacious and comfortable, but the places to be are the rooftop pool and bar and the downstairs lounge, where expert bartenders make painstaking work of mixing cocktails. The hotel serves a mighty fine breakfast, too.

Speaking of food, Chilean cuisine is also underrated. The traditional palate is not big on spice and has more in common with the Mediterranean than its Latin neighbors, says Caskey. But check the produce aisle at your grocery store. Central Chile is the breadbasket to the world—after they save the best for themselves. Santiago has more than 400 food markets, including the massive La Vega, which spans 12 city blocks. Many stalls sell avocados: The country grows 12 kinds of avocado, and Chileans put it on everything. That by itself would make Santiago worth a visit.

And then there's the wine. Santiago is just a stone's throw from some of the best wineries in South America. A good place to start is in the city, at the popular, cosy restaurant and wine bar [Bocanariz](#), in Lastarria, which serves 12 varied wine flights, 36 wines by the glass and half glass, and nearly 400 by the bottle, all of them Chilean.

From there it's worth a day trip (at least) to explore the Colchagua Valley—and Caskey works her industry connections to get her clients invited to top wineries that aren't open to the public. The experiences range from [Viña los Vascos](#), a Rothschild-owned “brother” winery of Chateau Lafite Rothschild and a pioneer in making export-quality wines in Chile, where guests can taste wine and enjoy lunch in a gorgeous *casona*, filled with Richard Avedon photos of the winemakers, in the middle of 700 hectares of grapes, to scrappy garage winemakers.

Among the latter is Chilean winemaker Sven Burchfeld, who broke with conventional wisdom and set out to make interesting Syrahs and Malbecs under the name [Polkura](#), which we tasted on a folding table he set up in the vineyards (*garage winemaker* being somewhat literal in this case). “I don't like making wine for the market,” he says. “I like making wine for myself.”

That independent sentiment sums up a lot of what makes Santiago so interesting now.

*For insider connections and custom travel experiences, contact [Liz Caskey Culinary & Wine Experiences](#).*

*Getting there: [LAN Airlines](#) flies daily from New York, Miami and Los Angeles to Santiago on new, well-outfitted 787s, in which premium business class features 110 movies, wines chosen by Latin America's only master sommelier and meals designed by chef Hugo Pantano.*