

CHILEAN

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Santiago's geography has shaped its character, preserving a cosmopolitan feel and a positive personality

WORDS RALF WALTERS

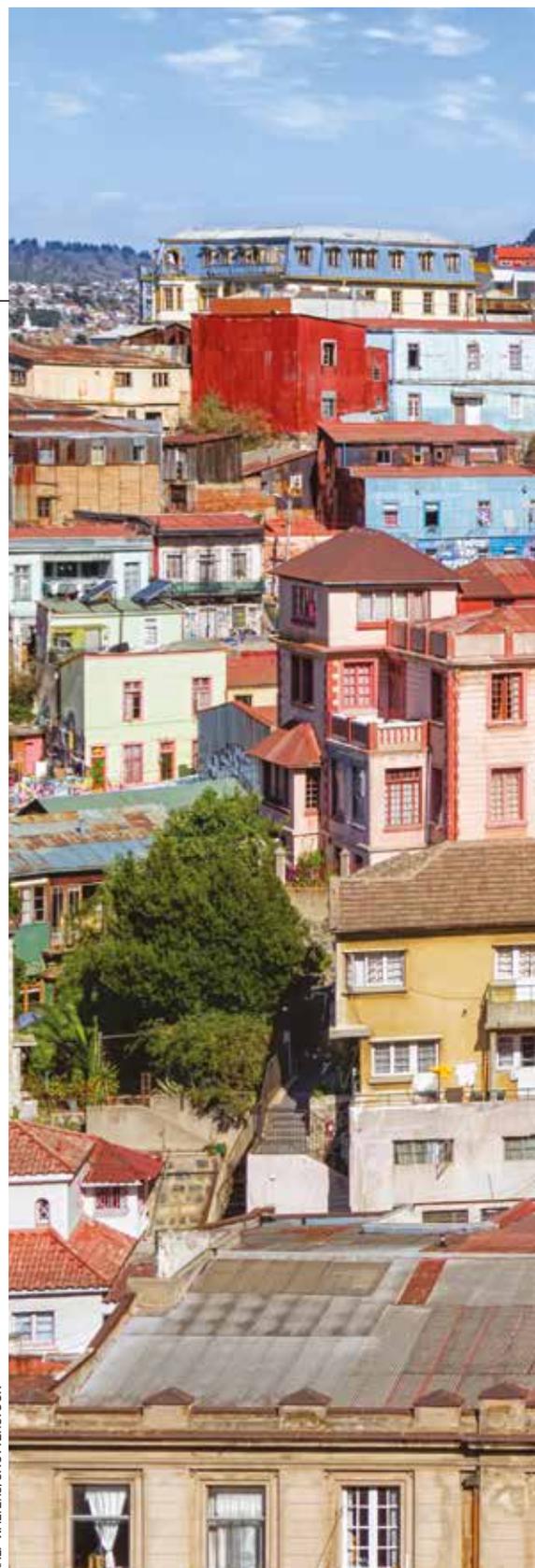
Buena Onda," which translates as "Good Vibes," is a phrase that captures the essence of Latin American cultures. And for Chile, a narrow stretched-out arm of land sandwiched between the Pacific coast and the Andes Mountains from its northern border with Peru to the southernmost tip of South America at Cape Horn, the good vibes take on their own distinctive flavor. Indeed, I felt good vibes and tasted the distinctive flavors as soon as I boarded the LATAM Airline flight from JFK to Santiago.

The buena onda feel continued as dinner was served early in the flight. LATAM had just introduced their new Economy cabin menu for its long-haul international flights and I was eager to sample. There were three choices available: I opted for gnocchi with parmesan sauce, sautéed mushrooms and pesto with a glass of Gandolini Las 3 Maria Vineyards, Cabernet Sauvignon 2012, to complement – it was "Muy delicioso!"

After dessert, I began to reflect on just how just far south Santiago is from New York City. Adjusting my east-to-west, North Star orientation, I pondered the idea that my flight would be almost as long as the number of hours it took me to fly JFK to Cairo a few years earlier. At a notch above 5,100 miles, the distance to Santiago is just shy of my journey to the Land of the Pharaohs. Contemplating this as the plane went dark, I fell asleep.

When the sun rose, everyone was awakened for breakfast. We would be landing in Santiago in six more hours, far below the equator and 693 miles south of the Tropic of Capricorn. Raising the shade, I was impressed by the beauty of the snow-capped Andes Mountains. Comodoro Arturo Merino Benítez International Airport, aka Santiago International Airport (SCL), awaited.

As we approached "Greater Santiago" I saw a sprawling modern metropolis. With a population of 6.5 million, it blankets 37 municipalities. The city itself, nestled in the country's central valley, sits at an elevation of 1,700 feet. With the Andes still looming to the east, the airport's runways came into view. Officially named Santiago de Chile, the federal capital of the Republic of Chile looked welcoming.



RALF WALTERS/SHUTTERSTOCK

DESTINATIONS





My driver met me at the airport and took me to the Hotel Cumbres Vitacura, a 5-star, 16-story oasis in the northeast part of the city. The pleasant 30-minute drive on a major highway through the heart of town was a terrific introduction to this modern capital as late model cars of all global brands buzzed around us. Construction cranes could be seen dotting the skyline.

My first impression – Santiago is a very prosperous place. The driver was gracious in trying to understand what I can only describe as my pidgin Spanish. We agreed that she would practice her English and I, my Español. We passed the hotel three times due to construction on a new underground traffic circle that will eventually tie together three major highways; I was dizzy as we entered and exited the worm hole.

After an additional 20 minutes, the driver and I finally figured out which exit was Avenida Presidente Kennedy, the hotel's address. President John F. Kennedy seems to have a special place in the hearts of Chileans.

The sign greeting me at towering Hotel Cumbres Vitacura said it all: “El Viaje Es Largo Y El Descanso Tambien” (“The Trip is Long and the Rest Also”). Amen! I was exhausted. After unpacking, I headed for “The Glass,” the hotel's restaurant on the top floor. It serves up a great view of the city to the south. I ordered a delicious grilled salmon salad and glass of Sauvignon Blanc from Vina Matetic Corralillo, a local vineyard in nearby Valle de San Antonio.

Afterwards, feeling the need of a relaxing walk after a long flight and hefty lunch, I decided to explore the surrounding neighborhood. What I found was lush, palm-tree-lined streets with beautiful apartments with full-length terraces. The Vitacura barrio is one of the most expensive and fashionable areas of Santiago.

The Sights from the Heights

With its population of nearly 18 million, Chile has a strong manufacturing base, making it less vulnerable to the fluctuations of agriculture and mining, unlike other South American economies. As a result, Chile is one

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of the more urbanized societies with a growing middle class and stable democracy.

Late in the afternoon, I was treated to a guided tour of Cerro (Hill) Cristobal and Sky Costanera. It was near rush hour and traffic was building. Nevertheless, it was an exciting opportunity to jump into the hustle of Santiago and people watch. Many were beginning to queue up at the bus stops while others descended into the subway. The system has five lines that crisscross the city from 6 in the morning to 11 at night, and is a great way for visitors to see many of the city's landmarks.

The 984-foot Cerro San Cristóbal is visible for miles around, and for my first day in Santiago I had an incredible panoramic view which helped me orient myself in relation to the Andes Mountains and the Chilean Coastal Range (Cordillera de la Costa). The mountain range runs north and south parallel to the Pacific coast. Our hosts told us the sunsets up here are glorious – but we had no time to wait so had to press on.

Yet there was an impressive alternative: Sky Costnera. This is the highest observatory in all of South America at nearly 2,000 feet. The elevator ride took two minutes; strangely, it was so smooth I couldn't feel it moving. When the doors opened at the 62nd floor the stunning view overwhelmed.

Enclosed in glass, the observatory offered a 360-degree view of the entire region. For the adventurous, an escalator leads to an outdoor deck. As the sun began to set behind the coastal range, the sky became a fiery orange surrounded by smoky clouds. Open 365 days a year from 10:00 AM to 10:00 PM (last ride going up is at 9:00 PM) it's an attraction not to be missed. Be sure to call ahead for ticket prices and group reservations. The best time to view is after it rains. (Santiago, like most cities situated in a valley, suffers from periodic smog.)

The climate in Santiago can be described as Mediterranean – hot, dry summers and mild winters. But take note: The seasons are opposite from the northern hemisphere, so December there equals July in New York. Fortunately, I was visiting in early November, one of →

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FROM LEFT:
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Park in wealthy
Vitacura district,
Santiago

the best times of the year along with March to May. (If you want to ski the Andes, then schedule a visit in June to early September).

Coastal Breezes

I had decided much earlier that the best way to see the sights in Santiago and environs was to schedule a day trip. Turis Tour, founded in 1913, offers a variety of exciting trips. I chose to visit a nearby vineyard with wine tasting and then on to the coast to experience Vina del Mar and Valparaiso. The cost is approximately \$57.

Our first destination on the way to Vina Del Mar was Vina Matetic in Fundo el Rosario, Casablanca Valley. Our tour guide was proficient in English, but I enjoyed his impeccable and rhythmical Spanish as he described interesting facts along the way in both languages.

The setting of Matetic Vineyards with its boutique hotel is rustic and strikingly peaceful. Sprawling over hundreds of acres, it cultivates a variety of different grapes. We were treated to a tour of the winery including the dimly lit subterranean storage room where barrels upon barrels of wine were aging in a cave-like atmosphere of 55 degrees.

Upon re-surfacing, we headed for the wine tasting room where we were greeted by a host and a wall full of framed awards proclaiming the superior wines produced by Matetic. We sampled several of their top labels, complemented with nuts and delicate cheeses and crackers.

The Matetic Syrah 2011 was my favorite. Our host explained that it was produced from black-and blue-berried fruit, white pepper, and pan juices mingled with fine tannins to give it a perky acidity and long finish. Matetic takes advantage of the arid climate and gentle Pacific coastal breezes which tumble over the coastal range, giving their grapes a light salty covering and signature provenance.

With no time to waste, we departed for Vina Del Mar, population 324,000, about an hour's drive. Known as

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the "Garden City," Vina del Mar is picturesque with its green surroundings and beautiful large gardens. Recognized for its fine architecture, stunning palace and famous Flower Clock, it's a popular vacation spot for international travelers who enjoy its placid resorts, hotels, malls and entertainment venues including a casino. We had to stop and put a toe in the Pacific before heading to Valparaiso.

By far, the highlight of the day was touring Valparaiso. Founded in 1536, Valparaiso is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and important seaport, known for its steep funiculars and colorful, cliff-top homes. Interspersed are winding-staircase sidewalks and streets that are filled with colorful and artistic graffiti. We stopped to admire the work of artists as we made our way to the souvenir shops and high-end retail stores.

The street art in this vibrant city of 250,000 reflects the region's diverse population and heritage – a blend of Spanish and indigenous cultures. Restaurants and coffee shops abound. Everywhere we went, we could enjoy the sounds of street musicians, whether we were sipping espresso at a sidewalk café or stopping at a restaurant for fresh seafood and a glass of Carmenera, a fruity wine considered to be the national favorite.

Before heading back to Santiago, we had a wonderful lunch at Restaurant Fauna. With stunning views across the harbor from the outdoor terrace, we were treated to the music of an acoustic guitarist who sang, oddly enough, Beatle songs. One of the tourists, a Londoner, was an instant fan. Sticking with seafood at its freshest, I ordered baked salmon and a Chardonnay, followed by a rich chocolate torte.

I hope to return to Valparaiso for an extended stay some day; it's surreal, like a movie set. Best of all, the people here, like all the good people I met in Chile, are friendly and genial. There's a quiet, dignified sophistication in the air. On the whole, Chile is a must see destination, one I highly recommend. "Buena Ondo!" **BT**