

# how to spend it

DESTINATIONS

## Southern gloss

In Chile's south, a land that constantly tests the limits of the imagination, architecturally sophisticated hotels are being grafted onto the wildest of landscapes, opening up some of the world's last untraveller nature to discerning voyagers, says **Charlotte Sinclair**



A terrace space at the Vifia Vik cabin, on Alexander Vik's 1,000-acre vineyard

Image: Courtesy of Vik Retreats

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At the very tail end of the American continent – the very tail end of the world – the land simply runs out of ideas. Civilisation cedes to wilderness, to nature's most dramatic spectaculars. Terra firma becomes a lot less *firma*, dispersing into fjords and archipelagos, glacier fields and lonely, wind-strafed penguin colonies. This is Chile, a country closer to Antarctica than New York. It embodies that feeling, too, as for all its increasing modernity, this narrow ribbon of land facing the Pacific is a place gloriously out of time. Mention it, and visions flood the mind of sun-sprinkled vineyards and Atacama's starry skies, of gauchos tending sheep on vast, empty estancias, and Bruce Chatwin's "farthest place" – the dreamscapes of Patagonia – all of which remain bewitchingly true to reality. Yet equally pervasive are thoughts of the Pinochet dictatorship that saw thousands of political opponents tortured and "disappeared". It is recent history, and one that few speak of here – the wounds are perhaps too fresh, too recent. But there is another factor at work, a countering sense of a country in a state of self-definition, of a younger generation more eager to face the future.

This forward impulse is evident in Chile's broadening tourist appeal – a distinct and characterful scene to rival the shoutier claims of neighbouring Argentina. Once the remit of backpackers, Chile's south is opening up to luxury travellers. The new mode sees architecturally sophisticated hotels grafted onto the wildest landscapes, places that, by their geographic coordinates, emphasise adventure while offering all the comforts and services of the most impressive urban resorts.

In Chile's Cachapoal wine country, two hours south of Santiago, I drive past a *huaso* (a northern gaucho) on his horse in the middle of the road. To either side stretch long green avenues of vines covered in fat, black grapes, interrupted by the occasional smallholding, a crowd of willows by a brown stream, a melon patch or a clump of cacti. Protected by hills and cooled by Andean and Pacific breezes, this land is remarkably fertile – a fact evidenced by the all-blossoming plant life, but also by the newly paved road that leads to Alexander Vik's 10,000-acre vineyard in the Millahue Valley.

A Norwegian financier, Vik made his hotel debut in Uruguay with Playa Vik and Estancia Vik – art-filled, architecturally dynamic places to stay. He's set to make his mark on Chile with the building of a new hotel, due to open in early 2014, to add to the Viña Vik winery, completed this summer. The *terroir*, headed by winemaker Patrick Valette, is divided between sunny hillside and valley floor, the finished product a delicious mix of Cabernet, Merlot, Syrah, Carménère and Cabernet Franc: "We want to make the best wine in the world," says Valette. For visitors, there's a four-bedroom cabin with private chef. Black-panelled and tin-roofed, the pavilion teeters on the edge of a hill, the glass walls of its end bedroom offering a panoramic view of the lake and a bowl of wild pasture that recalls a Serengeti watering hole, evoking the rustic sophistication and high standards at play here.

Viña Vik, +562-248 2218; [www.vikretreats.com](http://www.vikretreats.com), four-bedroom cabin from \$1,000, all inclusive.