

how to spend it special travel edition

IN VINA VIK VERITAS

For a decade, financiers-turned-hoteliere Alexander and Carrie Vik have been quietly shaping an ambitious vineyard in a sleepy valley in southern Chile. This month, they debut an avant-garde 22-room retreat – enlivened by dynamic architecture and site-specific art. But everything, finds Maria Shollenbarger, comes back to that wine

If you stand in the centre of the shallow green bowl that is the Millahue Valley, in southern Chile, and glance west towards Colchagua province, you'll see a curious metallic glow atop a low hill almost directly in front of you. Look closer: the bronze-silver glinting seems almost patterned, an undulating texture, rather like scales. As you home in on it, you'll note that the glow takes shape – a soft-edged structure rises just above the thick tree line, catching the sunlight that filters between fast-moving clouds and dapples in shadow the thousands of acres of vineyards rolling

away in every direction. It's a building, clearly, but just what sort remains a mystery; until you follow the meandering cobbled road that curves up the slope to the summit – whereupon the mystery deepens quite spectacularly. What you come upon is an abstracted dream of steel and glass, concrete and dynamically curving polished titanium tiles (those "scales" gleaming in the sun) – a creation that recalls here a bit of Gehry, there a bit of Serra, and perhaps over there a bit of Ando. It's an avant-garde jolt to the senses, set incongruously in a picture-postcard agrarian scene. Definitely intriguing was my first experience of Viña Vik, which opened earlier this month – all the

more so for the environment in which this profoundly original hotel sits. But then, Alexander and Carrie Vik, the couple behind it, have made something of a name for themselves with exactly this sort of iconoclastic take on hospitality, marrying stunning natural locations with adventurous architecture and art that challenges preconceptions about both luxury hotels and how guests interact with the creativity and design themes they encounter therein. The Viks' other retreats – Estancia Vik and Playa Vik, in José Ignacio, and the soon-to-open Bahía Vik, just up the road in the same town, adjacent to their beachside restaurant, La Susana – are intimate, almost experimental enclaves

of site-specific design and works by local artists, inserted into natural settings as alluring as this one. But in Viña Vik's case, there's a game-changing element in the formula. Here in Millahue, the hotel didn't come first. It was born of another passion entirely; that which the Viks have cultivated for wine and, attendant to it, an aspiration to produce one of the finest reds not just in the southern hemisphere, but in the world. The story began over a decade ago: in 2004, the couple enlisted two of the preeminent wine consultants working in Chile – the Frenchmen Patrick Valette (in whose family the venerable Château Pavie, in Saint-Émilion, had been since 1919; Valette sold up in 1998) and Gonzague de Lambert (who was raised at, and is owner and director of, Château de Sale, in Pomerol). Both had been working on various projects in the nearby Colchagua Valley, which is generally considered to produce Chile's finest wines. Alex Vik charged them with finding a parcel of land where he and Carrie could realise their dream. The search covered multiple sites across Argentina and Chile, meticulously narrowed by process of elimination: Viña Vik (pictured on final page), comprising 10,690 acres, was subjected to thousands of soil tests, as well as analyses of hydric flows, thermal amplitude, geographic orientation and the region's unusual wind conditions, over the course of an entire year. (The differences in terrain across the 12 valleys in which the vines – Cabernet Sauvignon,



Main picture: Viña Vik's winery in the Millahue Valley, inset: the Fornasetti Suite



Convention, however, is not what the Viks are trading in out here in Millahue – not with the wine they produce, and not with the hotel they designed themselves

Clockwise from left: the cantilevered pool overlooking the vineyard. One of the seating areas in the living area, with Anselm Kiefer's lead diptych on the wall. The bedroom in the Chile Suite

by Roberto Matta (one of the country's most revered 20th-century painters) and on the other by a 29ft-long monumental lead diptych from Anselm Kiefer's *Secret Life of Plants* series, and surrounded by contemporary furniture of wildly varied style.

Each suite in the retreat is entirely unique. Lest that sound like a tiredly familiar bit of website tout from any garden-variety boutique hotel, rest assured Viña Vik's

spa, on the lower-ground floor, consists of just four grey-on-beige treatment rooms, with similarly simple menus of massage and facial therapies – all of which will eventually feature a custom-blended vinotherapy product line *Carrie Vik* is in the process of formulating with consultants. The design is all about surprise, aesthetic challenges and contemporary culture. But the actual experience of a stay at Viña Vik is largely rooted in one of the most ancient pursuits known to man – the cultivation of grapes for winemaking.

Cabernet Franc, Carmenère, Syrah and Merlot – are planted are enormous, resulting in vast discrepancies in character and ripening stages of the grapes.) The Viks put in the first vines in 2006; they produced their debut vintage in 2009; 2012 is now *en primeur*.

In 2007, architects across the country were summoned to tender in a competition to design the winery itself, set in the flats of the valley, amid the largest tracts of vineyard; the project was eventually awarded to Smiljan Radic, who designed the 2014 Serpentine Pavilion.

("When we found Smiljan, he wasn't quite as famous as he is now," notes Alex Vik, with characteristic dryness.) Radic's long, low, almost ethereal building casts rough stone and flowing water elements, black concrete and white high-spec PVC roofing in a fantastically dynamic dance of space, light and texture. A casual bistro and tasting lounge at its western end, called *The Pavilion*, which debuted with the hotel this month (and is open to the public), is adorned with sculptures executed in rusted steel and espino wood by Radic's wife, the esteemed Chilean artist Marcela Correa.

For the past five years, set into the hillside below where the hotel now gleams imperiously, there has been what the Viña Vik team refers to as the "cabin" – a tar-washed, four-bedroom longhouse with cheminée, open kitchen and private chef, where travellers who made the pilgrimage to sample the Viks' and Valette's increasingly buzzed-about wine would bunk down in



style. The Cabin will continue to host guests; it speaks in a vernacular that is arguably more suited to the landscape, in conventional terms.

Convention, however, is not what the Viks are trading in out here in Millahue – not with the wine they produce, and not with the hotel they designed themselves, together with the Uruguayan architectural designer Marcelo Daglio, a collaboration that is also behind two of the other Vik properties. Guests are welcomed in the open-format living room (pictured top, right and overleaf), with floor-to-ceiling glass walls that allow for a view straight through to a zen garden. An antique snooker table dominates the centre of the space, flanked on one side by two large canvases

Alex Vik's Norwegian heritage – mixes a traditional antique Orkla hand-knit rug (repurposed elegantly as a headboard) with works by the early-20th-century Oslo painter Axel Revold and a large canvas by Kjell Nupen, arguably the country's leading contemporary artist, until his death earlier this year.

I stayed in the Chile Suite (pictured above and overleaf), which hit every possible Vik note with perfect tone, from the sisal-covered walls (an unorthodox and very cool take on hessian), to the cactus-wood doors, to the serape-upholstered ottomans, to an exquisite painted work on burlap – a sombre 21st-century interpretation of the traditional *arpilleras* woven by peasant women. Even the bathroom somehow managed



From top: one of the seating areas in the living area, with two works by Roberto Matta on the wall. The winery seen from a distance. The bathroom in the Chile Suite

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to feel deeply coddling, despite having rough, brown adobe walls. (It may have had something to do with the extraordinary bathtub – almost 6ft long and more than 2ft deep, fashioned from thin beech wood on strips held together with resin, and custom-designed for the Viks by canoe makers they work with in Uruguay.) The spa, on the lower-ground floor, consists of just four grey-on-beige treatment rooms, with similarly simple menus of massage and facial therapies – all of which will eventually feature a custom-blended vinotherapy product line *Carrie Vik* is in the process of formulating with consultants.

The design is all about surprise, aesthetic challenges and contemporary culture. But the actual experience of a stay at Viña Vik is largely rooted in one of the most ancient pursuits known to man – the cultivation of grapes for winemaking. One misty morning, Valette and I saddle up and ride through the vines and into the hills in the far valleys of the estate. We discuss the native flora, the wildly varying terroirs surrounding us, and the relative merits of the smooth, hyper-refined wines of Bordeaux versus the more assertive reds produced in Chile. Valette, one of the most singularly gentle and charismatic people I've come across, is not indulging me with three hours of his company just because I'm a journalist: his engagement with all the hotel's guests will be as seminal to the Viña Vik visitor experience as is that of the low-voiced and lovely spa director, Cecilia Lavín, or its superlative chef Rodrigo Acuña Bravo



(who logged stints at the Kingsbrae Arms Relais & Châteaux and Europa Inn, both in New Brunswick, Canada, and who produced sublime, simple food – lamb chops in garlic and thyme, quinoa salads with minced organic vegetables and lemon vinaigrette; heavenly gnocchi in a goat's cheese and spinach velouté – served to us farm-style). Likewise with de Lambert, and also the Viks themselves, when they are in residence. There are extensive tastings on offer, either in the winery itself or in the gorgeous, wood-paneled *biblioteca*, where Valette or master winemaker Cristian Valetto will discourse in detail on the elements of the 2013 blend, which is currently being aged in new French-oak casks just down the hill in Radic's masterpiece of a bodega. The passion for the product, and the land, permeates everyone involved in the Viña Vik project, and traditional role distinctions are transcended in a way I've not seen elsewhere. It's unconventional, delightful and original – like the hotel itself, glowing improbably on the hill above the vines. ♦
 Maria Shellenbarger travelled as a guest of Viña Vik (+598-9460 5212; www.vikretreats.com), where suites start at \$1,200 per person. British Airways (0844-493 0787; www.ba.com) flies daily to Santiago, via Madrid in a codeshare with Iberia, from £1,045, or via São Paulo in a codeshare with LAN Airlines, from €91.