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# TRAVELER

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The Colchagua Valley, a day trip from Santiago, produces many of Chile's world-class wines.

## Red Hot Chile

Like the rest of Chile, Santiago—with lots to do in and around the capital—is sizzling. **By Jonathan Franklin**

**F**IFTEEN YEARS AGO, CHILE was synonymous with dictator Augusto Pinochet and human rights abuses. Today Chile more likely evokes thoughts of award-winning wines, dramatic landscapes, and a wind-fall of outdoor activities. Given the wild wonders of Chile's geography, most travelers arrive in Santiago, spend a night, then head to any and all points: north to the Atacama Desert, east to the Andes, south to the granite spires of Torres del Paine National Park, or west to the most remote Chilean territory, mysterious Easter Island.

But the booming Chilean capital and

*Santiago-based* JONATHAN FRANKLIN is a correspondent for the Guardian newspaper, and co-wrote Rough Guide to Chile.

its environs have plenty to offer in their own right:

■ **Gourmet Barrio Tours** Once abandoned and rundown, the colonial-era barrios of Brasil and Yungay, west of Santiago's city center, have started to acquire chic boutiques and funky restaurants, housed in renovated, turn-of-the-century buildings. For help in digging out the barrios' architectural gems and authentic tastes, turn to U.S.-born Liz Caskey. A Wall Street banker turned Santiago chef, Caskey leads an entertaining half-day culinary walking tour of the barrios, with stops for historic landmarks and samples of local treats (say, homemade goat cheese piled atop bread plucked warm from the oven at a mom-and-pop bakery). A visit to a farmers market yields the ingredients for a three-course gourmet lunch prepared by

Caskey—with help from guests, if they like—in her Barrio Yungay loft ([www.lizcaskey.com](http://www.lizcaskey.com)).

■ **At Home with Pablo Neruda** Poet Pablo Neruda set up his Santiago love nest, named La Chascona, in the Bellavista barrio. A guided tour of the art- and book-filled abode, one of three Neruda houses in Chile now open to the public, provides a glimpse into the Nobel Prize winner's life.

■ **Wine Tasting in the Colchagua Valley** Hop aboard a newly refurbished steam locomotive and feel drawn back in time as you chug two hours south to wine country. The once little-known town of Colchagua is now a center for Chilean wine tours. Businessman Carlos Cardoen has developed Chile's most extensive wine-tasting cellar inside the three-year-old Hotel Santa Cruz Plaza (\$153/person for wine route package, including double room, meals, and vineyard visits; [www.hotelsantacruzplaza.cl](http://www.hotelsantacruzplaza.cl)). After tasting some of Chile's finest wines—such as the Montes Alpha Syrah 2001—dine at the on-site restaurant with its seasonally changing menu that may include rabbit or Easter Island tuna.

■ **Skiing at Portillo** Two hours northwest of Santiago by car lies the intimate resort of Portillo ([www.skiportillo.com](http://www.skiportillo.com)). Last year *Ski Magazine* named it one of the world's top ten ski resorts. Even if you don't ski, the scenery alone makes a visit memorable. Adjacent peaks rise to about 19,000 feet, and nearby Mount Aconcagua soars to 22,830 feet. Guests stay at the rustic Hotel Portillo, which sleeps 450 and overlooks the sapphire Inca Lake. A week-long ski package (from \$650 per person) includes lodging, meals, lift tickets, and access to the splendid heated outdoor pool. The social scene at the lodge gets a boost from a lively *discoteca* and the occasional Olympian sighting (Austrian skier Hermann Maier, American skier Daron Rahlves). The 2004 Portillo season runs from June 12 to October 9, with various "theme weeks" dedicated to Chilean wine, fine dining, and the ever popular singles week. ■