

Take a Wine Tour in Chile



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From the Colchagua Valley to the Cordillera de la Costa mountain range, Luxury London samples Chile's finest wines during a cycling tour that winds through the country's sensational wine country

"Wine is for pleasure, not contests," says Christian Vallejo, winemaker at Vina VIK, holding a glass of their 2010 vintage up to the light. "The wine has to invite you to feel things. If you drink it, you have to have pleasure."

If pleasure was what they were going for at arty retreat and winery Vina VIK, the most talked about new opening in South America, they've nailed it (they may also soon be winning contests...).

It doesn't hurt that their excellent wine (a blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Carmenere, Cabernet Franc, Merlot and Syrah) is on tap at the hotel in Millahue, within the Cachapoal Valley, two hours south of Santiago in Chile's famous wine country. The 'pleasure principle' seems to be at the heart of the hotel and spa, too.



Vina VIK is one of the first few stops on a new cycling tour of Chile's wine regions, the hilltop hotel making a big impression as we arrive, its sculpted titanium roof glowing gold with reflected sunlight.

From the front of the hotel, I look out onto vineyards and the snow-covered Andes. It's instantly peaceful.

My suite, one of 22, is next to a courtyard with Zen-style raked gravel and Bonsai trees. Like VIK's other hotels in Uruguay, modern art is central here, with each suite designed by a different artist; the authentic Japanese 'Shogun' and Sebastian Valenzuela's colourful Dali-esque 'Valenzuela' both stand out.

I stay in the spacious 'Hollywood' suite, which is decked out with paintings by Chilean artist Roberto Matta of Marilyn Monroe, Brigitte Bardot and one of Ann-Margret, from a film fittingly called *The Pleasure Seekers*. A wall-sized window looks out onto a reservoir below.



Onsite wine guide, Miguel Oqueli, gives me a 4X4 tour of the 10,688 acre property and winery. "The owners looked everywhere and this was the right place," he tells me. "We have diversity of soil and microclimates here, which helps with the complexity of the wines."

VIK's wine is in seemingly endless supply in the hotel's restaurant, which is also putting this place on the map. "We have a lot of fun here," executive chef Rodrigo Acuña Brava tells me at lunch. "Some chefs are proud that they change the menu four times a year. We change it twice a day, for lunch and dinner, depending on what comes in fresh." There's no menu, just freedom to improvise with local produce for hearty lunches and fine-dining dinners, such as hake served with squid ink agnolotti stuffed with scallops.

When not drinking my own body weight in fine wine, I borrow one of the hotel's bikes to explore the vast vineyards and lake, a popular spot for geese, ducks, tinamou and quail.

I spend another day hiking the hills framing the valley, getting a sense of the changing land and microclimates; there are sections of red rock, where vultures soar over the cacti-covered hillside, and other parts with the feel of English woodland. If there was any remaining stress, it was gone by the end of VIK's Signature Treatment in the spa, a hot bath, with a glassful of wine added to the water for the relaxing aroma, followed by a rejuvenating massage, then dinner and more wine...

Reluctant to leave, I ride out of VIK's vineyards the next morning with cycling guide Ernesto Palm, zigzagging through the world famous Colchagua Valley. With farmers fixing fences, cockerels crowing and horses tethered to trees, this feels like a proper slice of rural Chile. "This is the main farming area of Chile," Ernesto tells me as we pass an orchard of plum trees covered in white blossom.

We stop for the night in Marchihue, staying at Hotel Residencia Histórica de Marchihue, a traditional hacienda that was originally home to a congregation of Jesuits. "Chile's wine is the best I've ever tried," Ernesto tells me proudly in the evening, as we sit next to a roaring fire, sinking a bottle of Cabernet Sauvignon and an excellent Carmenere. "It has a lot of what we call cuerpo (body). Wine is part of our culture."

"Carmenere is Chile's national wine," he continues. "It's like Champagne in France; Carmenere is only made in Chile. We're very proud of it."

We ride southwest through the Colchagua Valley the next morning, past orchards of olive trees, unending lines of vines and wide open fields occupied by sheep. Stopping at a junction, a huaso (Chilean cowboy) wearing a flat-topped sombrero and poncho dismounts nearby, tethering his horse and walking down the street, his spurs clinking with each step.

Our route crosses the Cordillera de la Costa mountain range to the coast, gaining 800 metres over a steady, sometimes challenging, 13 kilometres of climbing. This is where we earn our wine.

An easy roll downhill takes us into the surf town of Pichilemu, where we refuel with Chile's famous ceviche, conga eel tortellini and bottles of Carmenere and a Chilean Malbec, while waves crash onto the beach below.

I develop a new appreciation for Carmenere and other Chilean wines as we make our way through the region, some of them among the best wines I've tasted. "We have a very special quality in the Colchagua Valley soil for making wine," explains Sabrina Almomacid, a guide at Vina Santa Cruz winery, which is owned by Carlos Cardoen, one of Chile's richest men. "For red wines in Chile, it has the best temperature, humidity and soil." We explore the hilltop museum, which has Easter Island-style Moai head statues and artifacts from Chile's native cultures, alongside a family of llamas, before pedaling on.

A clear highlight towards the end of the trip is a visit to Casa Lapostelle in the renowned Apalta Valley, a winery owned by the Marnier family (as in the Grand Marnier drink), with French wine master Michel Rolland as a partner. Down in the barrel room, next to the owner's multi-million pound wine collection, we sample glasses of Sauvignon Blanc, a fantastic Merlot and Clos Apalta, the winery's award-winning blend (Carmenere, Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon), which has a reputation as one of Chile's best.

You could say it's a rival to VIK's excellent blends, perhaps slightly better, or maybe VIK just nudges it. It's a tough call. But instead I prefer the idea that, when it comes to wine, it's not a contest; it's all about the pleasure.

Suites at Vina VIK start from £794 per room (double occupancy) per night, depending on the season. The VIK master suite costs from £1,590 to £1,988. Prices include breakfast, lunch and dinner with wine and other alcoholic beverages, as well as winery tour and tasting, horse-riding, mountain biking and other activities. To book, visit www.vinavik.com or call + 56 96193 1754.