



Michael Turek

By Sarah Reid

“It hardly ever rains in Santiago; every day is like this,” says my taxi driver with a shrug when I comment on the cloudless sky during the ride from the airport. Having travelled to Chile from the wettest corner of NSW, it’s exactly what I want to hear.

It’s my third visit to Chile and I’ve accidentally timed it perfectly. With a new president, a constitution in the works (to replace the one inherited from the Pinochet dictatorship) and COVID-19 restrictions easing, there’s a palpable sense of optimism in the hot, dry air as I set out to explore its sprawling capital.

Santiago’s historic centre is grittier than I remember, with its grand 19th-century buildings plastered in political graffiti. Popularised in the 1970s during Pinochet’s military rule, this protest art made a comeback as part of the anti-government demonstrations that erupted in 2019. The protests are (mostly) over but no-one has bothered to scrub off the slogans, stickers and posters, which are now part of the city’s social fabric.

Just across the Mapocho River, the bohemian enclave of Barrio Bellavista is covered with decoration of a different kind – colourful murals and mosaics adorn bars, clubs, theatres and artists’ workshops. The street art scene flourished following Chile’s return to democracy in 1990, when exiled artists returned with a desire

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to recreate the vibrant underground cultures they'd been immersed in abroad. A hub for creatives before the Pinochet era, the rundown buildings of Bellavista were the ideal canvas, as they are today for a new generation of artists who brighten the streets with paintings of giant pumas, fantastical faces and other-worldly beings.

It's quieter here mid-morning than I expected. The clang and tinkle of crates of alcohol being unloaded from delivery trucks echoes through the leafy avenues as I wander around filling my camera roll. "The pandemic has been tough on Bellavista," a fruit seller tells me when I stop to buy a peach. "Some venues closed but many are opening up again now that tourists are returning."

Among them is La Chascona (fundacionneruda.org), a museum that was originally an eccentric house built in the 1950s by Chilean poet Pablo Neruda for Matilde Urrutia, his not-so-secret lover. Stooping to enter the low-ceilinged Captain's Bar (he had a thing for ships), I feel like I've stepped into a psychedelic Mid-century dream. Apparently Neruda claimed that wine tastes better when sipped from coloured glass and as I pass through the narrow room filled with objets d'art collected during his frequent travels, I can imagine the Nobel Prize winner holding court at the table that remains set with multi-hued glassware.

The museum is in the foothills of Cerro San Cristóbal, Santiago's largest urban park. I'm told it's a 45-minute slog to the Virgin Mary

statue at the top, some 300 metres above the city, but with the day heating up I head to the summit on an open-sided shuttle bus packed with families (there's also a cable car). I come up here for the splendid, if hazy, views towards the snow-capped Andes but the small army of young couples canoodling on the steps seem much more interested in each other.

While Bellavista doesn't really get going until sundown, there's plenty of life to be found in its food scene. At Peumayén (peumayen.chile.cl), dishes are inspired by pre-Hispanic gastronomy and while the guanaco tartare, made from a close relative of the llama, isn't for me, the tasting menu (I choose the "land" option of terrestrial treats) is a culinary adventure, kicking off with a platter of breads arranged geographically by each recipe's origin. The sopaipilla, a fried disc made from flour and Andean pumpkin, is my favourite.

Long lunches segue seamlessly into cocktail hour. In this 'hood there are few better spots to watch the sun set over the urban jungle with a glass of Chilean chardonnay in hand than sixth-floor rooftop restaurant and bar Azoteca Matilde (Antonia Lopez Bello 0118, via Chucre Mazur). From my elevated perch I watch the streets fill with students and workers clocking off. By the time I'm back at ground level, drinkers from Bellavista's bars are spilling onto the sidewalks, the district now filled with energy, laughter and blaring Latin beats. ●