



The Former National Congress Building's gardens. RIGHT Iglesia de los Sacramentinos, as seen from La Diana's colonnade



Repurposed lamps at La Diana. LEFT The National Congress Building



Secrets of Santiago

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A nation that spans frozen fjords and dusty deserts, Chile claims the top spot in our Best in Travel list this year, making it the number-one country to visit in 2018.

In the midst of these epic landscapes is the capital, Santiago – its skyscrapers rising tall against a backdrop of snowy sierras. Long bypassed by visitors to Chile, this city is currently undergoing a renaissance, with a lively arts scene, revived urban spaces and an evolving food culture. Here are eight stops to make on your own pilgrimage.



Ride a cable car for epic views

Anyone seeking to get their bearings in Santiago should start by boarding the Cerro San Cristóbal cable car. Gliding over the city's botanical gardens, the skyscrapers of Santiago's business district fade into the haze. On the hill above stands a 22-metre statue of the Virgin Mary, her arms outstretched, as if beckoning the car to the summit. At her feet, visitors gaze out at ranges of distant Andean peaks that mark the border with Argentina. As fortune would have it, the food carts in Mary's shadow offer some of the tastiest empanadas in town, and Chile's beloved mote con huesillo (husked wheat and peach juice) never tastes sweeter than when slurped from this sunny perch.

● Single **cable-car ride** £1.50; telefericometsantiago.cl

A statue of the Virgin Mary stands on top of San Cristóbal hill; within the pedestal there is a small chapel. LEFT The cable car climbs above Santiago's financial district, 'Sanhattan'



Pedal by the banks of the Río Mapocho

Amid fields of wild grasses in the Parque Bicentenario is a sculpture of five cyclists gazing into the sky through telescopes. On the ground, real-life cyclists pedal through the park by the banks of the Río Mapocho – the brown river that meanders from the Andes to the Río Maipo, and on to the Pacific. Santiago's urban riverside is being transformed by a 26-mile bike lane that runs through the city. To ride the path's length is to understand the geography of Santiago: passing the glitzy business district of Las Condes, the graffitied streets of downtown and the gardens of the Parque Fluvial Padre Renato Poblete en route to the foothills of the Coastal Range. Chatting couples share the path with commuters in suits, all peddling together for fleeting moments before heading their separate ways.

● **Bike Santiago bike-share programme** has a one-day tourist plan for £6; bikesantiago.cl. **Mapocho42k bike lane** mapocho42k.cl →



La Búsqueda (The Search) is a 20-metre-high sculpture by Hernán Puelma in the Parque Bicentenario. BELOW A cyclist on the Mapocho42k bike lane





Learn a traditional cowboy dance

Katherine Soto Santibañez has danced 'cueca' ever since she was a little girl, so perhaps it was only natural that she would become a tutor at Santiago's legendary Casa de la Cueca, a temple to Chile's national dance. In a room cluttered with Chilean flags and photographs, Katherine helps two dozen students learn the basic steps, with partners flirting via elaborate footwork as they lock eyes. Soon the room thumps to a cacophony of crashing feet and twirling dancers. Katherine says the dance re-enacts the courting rituals of a rooster and hen, while the all-important pañuelo (handkerchief) acts as an extension of a dancer's arm. 'You can hook someone and pull them close or shoo them away, all without touching,' she says. People of all ages and backgrounds are represented here. Cueca has undergone something of a revival in Chile, as a younger urban generation searches for their rural roots.

● Two-hour **dance classes** Wednesdays and Fridays from £3.50; facebook.com/casadelacueca



Artist Mario Toral's mural *Memoria Visual de una Nación*, in Universidad de Chile metro station, boldly depicts fragments of Chile's history

Discover art on the underground

Beneath the streets of Santiago are two-dozen statues, paintings and murals that surface dwellers won't see. These much-lauded pieces are part of the Metro Arte programme, which has been installing artworks in underground stations since the 1990s. Rolling in to the Baquedano Station at the interchange of Lines 1 and 5, commuters see a man walking over the train tracks. He's balancing finely on a log and it seems he could come crashing down at any second. Parque Bustamante, one station away, sees cartoon eyeballs peeking out over commuters, while the Universidad de Chile station has an epic mural showing the history of the nation, starting with encounters between European explorers and indigenous Mapuche people.

● **Single journey** from 75p; metro.cl →

Take a stroll through Chilean history in a cemetery

Santiago's rambling Cementerio General is one of the grandest graveyards on the continent. Setting foot through its gates is like entering a city within the city: it is home to an estimated two-million graves, many tombs rising several storeys high like apartment blocks for the dead. Yet it's what's missing in this cemetery that draws many visitors. A large stone slab on the cemetery's edge is inscribed with the names of over 3,000 people who 'disappeared' during the dictatorship

of Augusto Pinochet, from 1973 to 1990. Below the monument lie flowers and sun-bleached photos of victims. A funeral procession passes by the monument and continues under the palm trees of Avenida Limay to the O'Higgins path, where a soaring white-stone memorial serves as the grave of Salvador Allende, the president ousted by Pinochet. The Cementerio is a solemn and fascinating place to spend an afternoon wandering among the tombs.

● **Cemetery** entry free; cementeriogeneral.cl

A sculpture of a lady's head in the Cementerio General lies in front of a monument to those who 'disappeared' during Pinochet's rule. **RIGHT** The eclectic décor at La Diana

Eat dinner in a former monastery

Housed within a former Catholic monastery and adorned with vintage coin-operated games, La Diana is easily Santiago's most unusual restaurant. Playfulness infuses every element of the operation: fun-house mirrors, staircases made of crutches and a network of ladders and bridges crisscrossing the old monastery walls. Co-owner Cristóbal Muhr says he spent years both collecting and building items to put in the restaurant. 'I wanted a space where you can have an experience,' he says, 'and a menu that puts a modern twist on traditional Chilean cuisine.' Chilean national pride shines through on the menu, in dishes such as local grilled octopus lying on a bed of heirloom potatoes or black tortellini floating in a thick sauce of piure, a marine invertebrate that grows on rocks and is harvested along Chile's rocky coast.

● **La Diana** mains from £8; ladiana.cl →



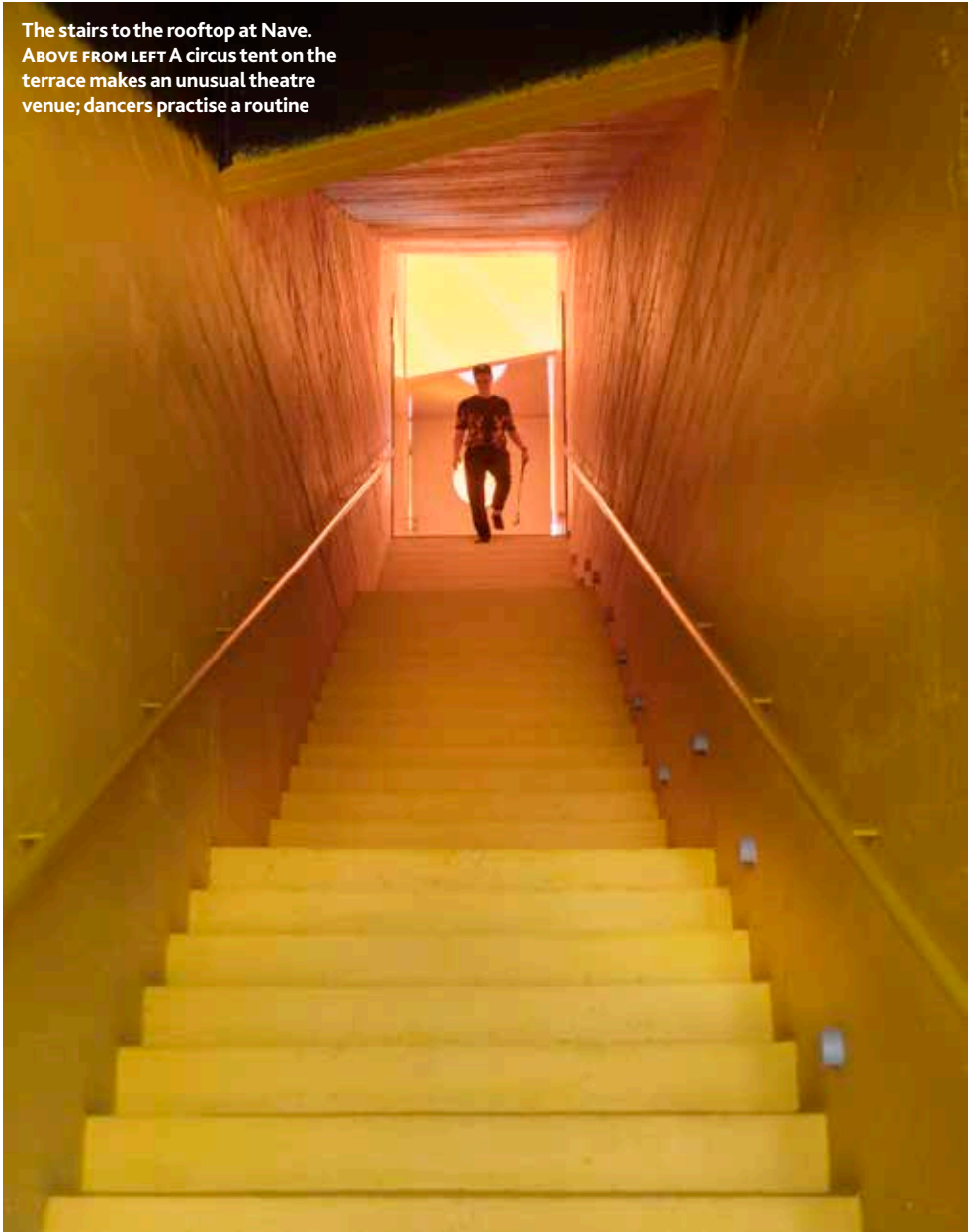


Attend the city's most experimental theatre

Barrio Yungay is one of the oldest districts of the city, its streets lined with gently decaying mansions. Behind one such façade you'll find Nave, a performance space spread across restored townhouses that's now at the forefront of an artistic revival in the neighbourhood. 'Nave is a centre for creation and a laboratory for developing new ideas,' explains co-artistic director María Vial Solar, as a group of dancers slowly slips their way down the walls, before writhing across the floor towards the audience. Performances here are designed to surprise and provoke. Upstairs there are more surprises: a giant big-top tent is pitched on the roof. It's a fine spot to idle about, listening to the flapping of the canvas and watching over a preserved corner of bygone Santiago, brimming with young artists and new possibilities.

● Events at **Nave** are often free; nave.io

The stairs to the rooftop at Nave. ABOVE FROM LEFT A circus tent on the terrace makes an unusual theatre venue; dancers practise a routine



A woman strolls along the Calle de Anticuarios (Antiques Street) in the Barrio Italia. RIGHT Playful street art in the barrio



Silvestre Bistró. LEFT The inviting exterior of a furniture shop in the Barrio Italia



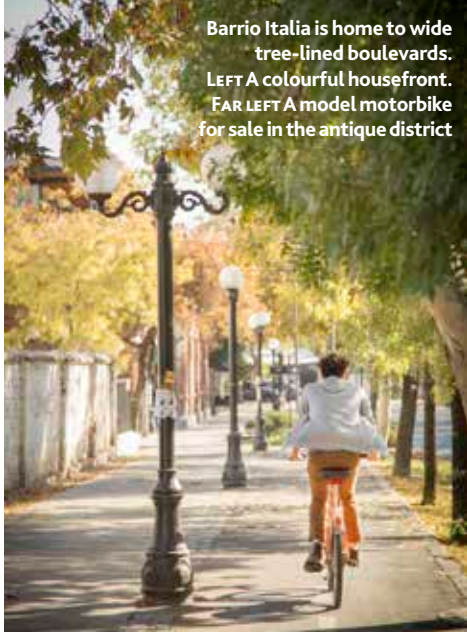
Explore a neighbourhood on the rise

Exploding; that's the term locals use to describe what's happening to Barrio Italia, Santiago's design district, currently being transformed as new and exciting shops open up in historic homes. Intrigue is everywhere as you enter unmarked arcades and walk past indie boutiques occupying what were once living rooms. Little alleyways lead to sunny patios where cafés have set up shop. One such place, Silvestre Bistró, sees chefs forage the Chilean hinterlands to create dishes such as pickled sea asparagus and ceviche of rhubarb. Over in the largest shopping arcade, Estación Italia, Xoco Por Ti serves a line-up of South American chocolates sorted by origin and served hot or frozen in ice cream. There are more boutiques, variously selling handcrafted leather shoes, wooden children's toys, graphic novels, colourful Andean textiles, wines and olive oils. Barrio Italia's young entrepreneurs need not look beyond the borders of Chile for inspiration.

● **Silvestre Bistró** mains from £6; facebook.com/silvestrebistro. **Xoco Por Ti** ice cream from £2; xocoporti.com. Read more at [barrioitalia.com](#).



MARK JOHANSON is an American travel writer based in Santiago. He has recently researched the Lonely Planet *Chile & Easter Island* guide.



Barrio Italia is home to wide tree-lined boulevards. LEFT A colourful housefront. FAR LEFT A model motorbike for sale in the antique district