4 Vineyard Vacations to Chile and Argentina

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By Charis Atlas Heelan

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Central Chile enjoys rich soil and a temperate, Mediterranean type climate, not unlike Bordeaux, and perfect for grape cultivation. Chile's wine production began in Spanish missions over 450 years ago and modern winemaking started in the 1820's when traders brought the first cabernet, chardonnay and syrah vines to the valleys and lower slopes of the Andes. Chilean wine is fruit driven, upfront and easy drinking. Reds are based on Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Pinot Noir with blackcurrant, cassis, plum and strawberry characteristics. Whites, like their Sauvignon Blancs are known for their light, crisp acidity and fresh citrus, gooseberry, melon and apple flavors. The main grape growing regions include Aconcagua, Casablanca, Maipo, Rapel, Maule and Bío-Bío.

Currently the fifth largest wine producer in the world, Argentina and more specifically, Mendoza province, on the eastern side of the Andes mountain range is hot, dry and well irrigated, making for excellent growing conditions for red grapes. The vineyards originally established by Spanish monks in the early 16th century now produce huge quantities of predominantly red wines -- Malbec, the most popular variety, alongside Pinot Noir, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Sangiovese. Malbec is a dark red wine aged in oak, which possesses black cherry, blackberry and spice aromas with a soft and velvety texture. The two main wine regions are Luján de Cuyo, 12 miles from Mendoza and Maipú, 10 miles from the city. Both areas have numerous wineries that are open to the public for tours and tastings.

Wine Travel Chile (tel. +**56/9-9 538-1177**; **www.winetravelchile.com**) has an energetic and indulgent six-day "Biking Chilean Wine Route" tour that runs throughout the year except for the months of June, July and August. The trip is priced at $1,700 per person and includes airport transfers, private transport with driver, support vehicle while cycling, communication equipment, guides specializing in Chilean wines, a bilingual (English and French) biking guide, a bike mechanic during the entire trip, an introductory talk on Chilean wine and wine regions given by an expert, five nights' lodgings at the four-star Bonaparte Hotel in Santiago and the five-star ocean front Radisson Acqua Hotel and Spa in Concón Valparaiso (Viña del Mar), five breakfasts, four lunches and four dinners with wine, gratuities for meals, snacks while cycling, city tour of Valparaiso and Santiago, entrance fees to vineyards with reserve and premium wine tastings, wine regions maps and a bicycle (helmets are not provided). Travel from

Santiago through Chile's beautiful wine regions, enjoying tastings, great views of the Andes, beautiful scenery, regional cuisine and local villages. Cycle through the Casablanca Valley, the San Antonio Valley, Casablanca village to Quintay village and Aconcagua Valley, approximately 20 to 30 miles per day at a moderate pace.

Santiago Adventures (tel. +**56/2-244-2750**; **www.santiagoadventures.com**) offers an eleven-day Chile and Argentina Wine Tour priced at $3,500 per person, land only. Departure dates are November 3 and December 8 2007, January 19, February 16 and March 29, 2008. The trip includes airport transfers, ten nights' accommodations (including Hotel Ritz Carlton in Santiago, Hotel Santa Cruz Plaza in the Colchagua Valley, The Hyatt in Mendoza and Robles de Besares wine lodge in Chacras de Coria), a guided tour of Santiago, two special dinners, breakfast and lunch daily, extensive wine touring and tastings at vineyards in Chile and Argentina, expert professional guides and private transportation. Highlights include Casablanca Valley's Viñedos Organicos Emiliana and Morandé Wineries' the UNESCO World Heritage city of Valparaiso' Antiyal Winery in Maipo; Altair Winery in the Cachapoal Valley; Vina Bisquertt, Montes Winery, Viu Manent winery and Los Maitenes Dairy Farm in the Colchagua Valley; Bodega Landelia and Ruca Malen Vineyards in Lujan de Cuyo; tastings with one of Mendoza's pioneering winemakers Carmelo Patti; Bodega Andeluna and Bodega Salentein in Valle de Uco; a Tango show with dinner in Buenos Aires; and a city tour of Buenos Aires.

If you don't want your entire vacation to be about wine but you'd still like to spend a day uncovering the best of Chile's vineyards, **Terracota Excursiones** (tel. +**56/2-698-8121**; **www.terracotachile.cl**) offers a number of wine day trips out of Santiago. Their "Visit to Concha Y Toro Winery" takes visitors to one of the largest and most respected wineries in Chile, founded in 1883. Visit the cellars, taste the fine selection of wines and will enjoy a traditional Chilean lunch at a restaurant in Pirque. This excursion also includes a bilingual guide and private transportation and is priced at $70 per person (in group of four people). The tour runs throughout the year. The "Wineries of Casablanca's Valley" tour spends the day in the Casablanca Valley and visits two well-known award-winning wineries in the region. This excursion includes a bilingual guide, private transportation, wine tastings and lunch in a typical Chilean restaurant for $61 per person (in group of four).

In Argentina's Mendoza region, **Ampora Wine Tours** (tel. **+54/261-429-2931**; **www.mendozawinetours.com/index.html**) can arrange various day trips to visit select vineyards in the area. Departing from Mendoza City, the "Wine Tour of Luján de Cuyo and Maipú" travels through the oldest wine region in Argentina. Visit Bodega Familia Cassone, a historic family-owned winery, built in the typical Mendoza style with high walls and wood ceilings. Enjoy a guided tour and tastings including their top wine Obra Prima Malbec. Continue to Bodega Achaval Ferrer, a winery known for wines that consistently rank 90 points or above in *Wine Spectator* magazine. Tastings are directly from the barrels and include all their ranges. Lunch is at Bodega Ruca Malen, a winery with a great view of the Andes mountain range, a fine menu and their top wine Kinien.

The final stop is Bodega Tempus Alba in Maipú, a winery known to produce one of the best Malbec in Mendoza. The tour is priced at $115 per person including lunch, all winery visits, wine tastings, transport and an English speaking expert guide. The "Uco Valley Wine Tour" takes visitors to a region compared by many to the Napa Valley 25

years ago. At a higher elevation than Luján de Cuyo, excellent high-altitude wines are produced from vineyards up to 4600 feet high, at the foot of the Andes. The tour departs from Mendoza and takes the scenic route via Tupungato. Visit Bodega Pulenta Estate, a boutique winery that just recently opened its doors to visitors; Ricardo Reina Rutini's Bodega Andeluna to taste their reserve wines and top wine Pasionado; and Bodega O'Fournier, one of the most impressive wineries in Mendoza both in terms of its architecture and its wines. Enjoy a gourmet lunch at Bodega O'Fournier accompanied by their top wine A Crux, a delicious blend of Tempranillo and Malbec. The tour price is $135 including lunch, winery visits, wine tastings, transport and an English speaking expert guide. Group size is two to eight people for both tours.

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