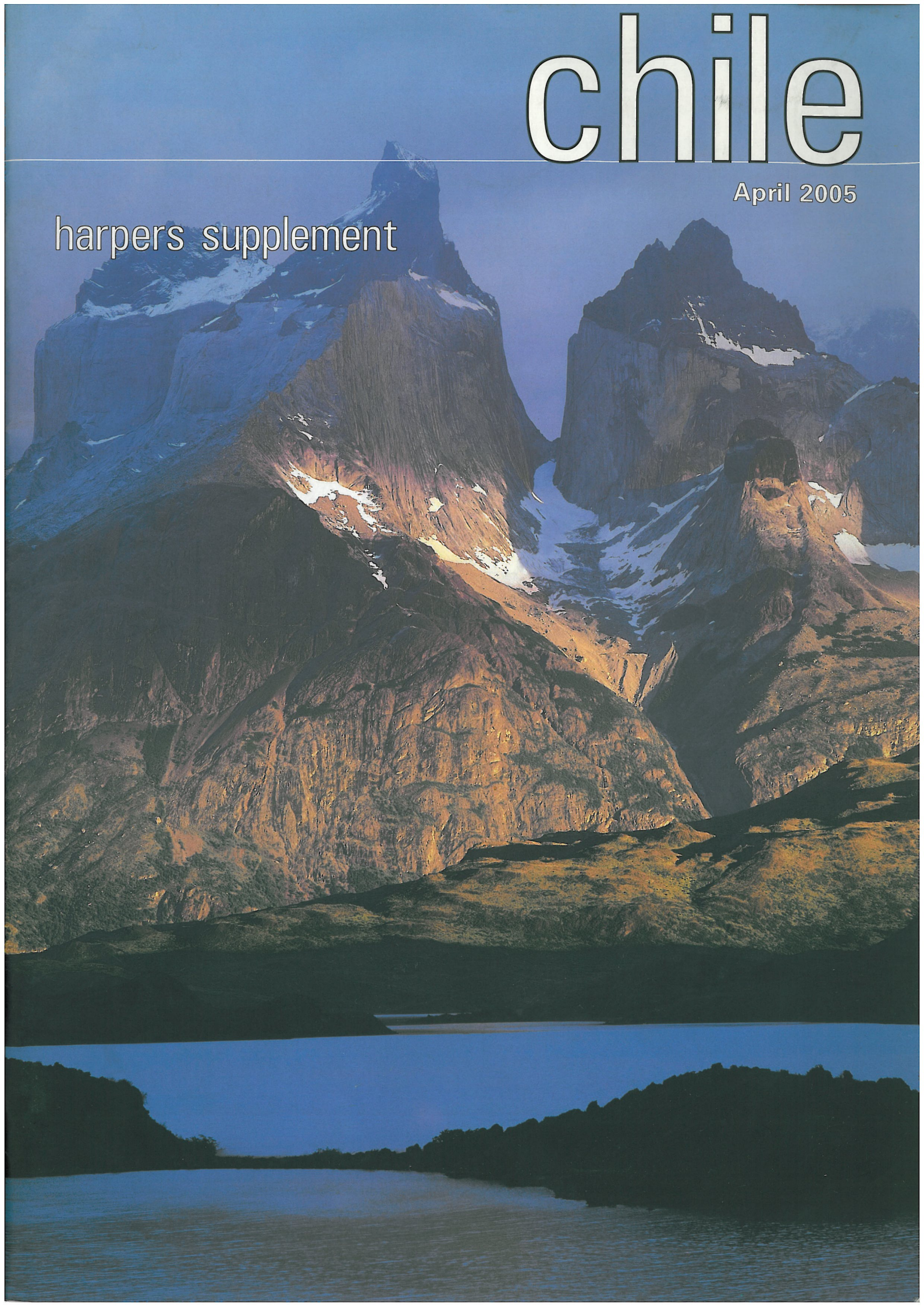


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WINE, NATURE AND BEAUTY

Though still not a major wine tourist destination, Chile is beginning to attract an increasing number of visitors to its wine routes. Anastasia Edwards reports

Forget the Wild West: Chile is the place to find your inner cowboy. While Josey Wales and Clint Eastwood's various other incarnations might have a monopoly on the image of self as brave, rugged pioneer (or self as Eastwood's squaw, as the case may be), riding through vineyards in the shadow of the Andes provides even the most pasty urban cowboy or girl with the chance to star in an adventure that is just being written.

If the country's natural resources provide virgin territory for the lover of nature and adventure, its wine industry – young yet dynamic – offers a chance to learn more about wine in one of the most inclusive, transparent industries in the wine world – not here the often intimidating, mystique-spinning châteaux and domaines of the Old World.

The Chilean wine world seems to be more and more aware of its powers of attraction. In Chile's Colchagua Valley, for example, tourism is a buzzword, with every other winery seemingly erecting or improving tourist facilities, and the Santa Cruz hotel, the region's first major tourist hotel, planning further expansion hot on the

heels of a new wing completed last year. It is a crucial time in Chile's evolution as both a tourism destination and a wine destination, but with the right promotional strategies in place, and with the right private sector infrastructure, it stands to be a wine tourism success story.

Michael Cox, director of Wines of Chile's UK office, has made wine tourism a priority in his promotion of Chile's wines in the UK and, while aware of the competition the country faces from more established wine tourism destinations, is optimistic about its prospects. 'Up until fairly recently, Chile has remained an undiscovered gem on the tourist map, seen by only the intrepid few,' he says. 'Chile, once described as "a crazy sliver of geography – a boot-lace on the map", is a haven for the modern traveller and is looking to become one of the most sought-after long-haul destinations for young and old. And wine can play a big part in this.'

Wine, in fact, could not only be an added attraction, but the main story, according to Cox. 'In the 1980s, Brits started flocking to

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Australia to gaze at the Sydney Harbour Bridge, hoping to catch a glimpse of a Crocodile Dundee or Kylie Minogue – and they discovered great wine in the process,’ he explains. ‘With Chile, it’s likely to be the other way round. Their growing love of Chile’s attractive and reliable wines will ultimately transport them from Tesco’s shelves to the Colchagua Valley.’

But putting the wine cart before the horse in promoting the country requires a focused, tightly managed campaign. In an effort to ‘fire the imagination’ of the consumer, Cox explains that the Wines of Chile campaign has, ‘for the past two years, placed much emphasis on promoting the image of Chile the country, as well as Chile the wine producer’. ‘The Wines of Chile concept is “Explore a New World”, and the images we depict in all the literature and information about Chile and its wine regions deliberately do not dwell on vineyards, barrels, tanks, cellars, etc – everyone has those!’ says Cox. ‘But which other country has the Atacama Desert, snow-capped volcanoes, Patagonian glaciers, monkey puzzle forests, moai statues on Easter Island and, of course, the pure snow melt from the Andes? It is the beauty and naturalness of Chile that inspires, and one of the elements that adds to this rich canvass is the vineyard. The wine valleys and the hills and mountains that surround them complete the picture and help cement the relationship in the consumers’ minds between wine, nature and beauty.’

But while two of the major London-based South American travel specialists agree that wine is a bonus in visiting Chile, wine tourism per se has not yet taken off as a discrete category within their offers. ‘We have offered Chile for over 20 years now – it was one of the first countries to be included in our brochures,’ says Tim Murray-Walker, marketing manager for Journey Latin America (www.journeylatinamerica.co.uk). ‘While we do not offer “wine tours” as specific holidays, visits to the vineyards near Santiago (eg Concha y Toro) have been offered for years.’ While Walker does not have any specific statistics for the number of people who go on wine tours to Chile, he says that of the visitors the company sends to Chile on tailor-made holidays and escorted group tours, ‘probably around 50% go on an excursion to one of the vineyards around Santiago’. ‘The clients we send to Chile will be going for a number of reasons, usually the outdoor activities, national parks and incredible diversity of its geography, and the wine element will always form a part of a longer trip,’ he explains.

He adds that ‘linking the wineries to the destination (lifestyle and tourism) is an excellent way to increase exposure and recognition for the region as a whole’, but



emphasises that ‘the region will need to be promoted well if it is to become known in its own right’. While he feels that the Chile Tourism Board (CPT) ‘should be persuaded to spend more on its UK promotion’, Journey Latin America collaborated last September with Wines of Chile on a Chile supplement in the *Independent* and with *Wanderlust* magazine on an Andes supplement earlier this year. He clearly believes that private sector outfits like his own have a key role to play.

Like Walker, David Gilmour, of London-based travel company South American Experience (www.southamericanexperience.co.uk), feels that wine is only part of the tourism story, though the company does offer wine-only private tours. ‘It has to be said that most of our passengers are visiting Chile for the scenery,’ Gilmour says. ‘But as wine is one of Chile’s leading exports, it certainly helps to put the country on the map. Chile is an important destination, and over the past few years we have noticed its popularity increasing. Most of our clients spend a few days in Santiago, and from our earliest days we decided to suggest a visit to one of the local vineyards. It quickly became apparent that most of our clients are highly receptive to the idea of a spot of wine tasting.’

The most concrete proof of Chile’s promise as a destination for a spot – or more – of wine tasting comes from the country itself. Statistics are hard to come by, but Thomas Wilkins, general manager of the Colchagua Valley Wine Route (www.colchaguavalley.cl), widely held to be the most successful wine route in Chile, says that 42,500 people have been on the wine route’s programmes since 1997, and that some 40,000 visit the Colchagua Valley Wine Route each year (see interview, p.28). And a further portent of the maturing of the wine tourism industry is a new specialist company focused solely on wine tourism. Two years ago, Sorbonne-educated Karen Gilchrist founded Wine Travel Chile (www.winetravelchile.com), a Chile-based company offering personalised wine trips to Chile and Argentina. Although Gilchrist acknowledges that while ‘in Chile the wine tourism culture is growing, but it is not very common’, she wanted to create

Wine Travel Chile because ‘in Chile there weren’t any companies focused on wine tourism. All tour companies in Santiago had a very reduced and somewhat boring offer, and they did not have any guides specialised in the subject,’ she explains. In its second year of operation, the company has had around 300 people from various countries, around 70% from the US and 30% from Europe, though only 10 so far from the UK. While most visitors have, as with the companies mentioned above, stayed close to Santiago, recently groups have started venturing further afield. ‘The most popular destinations are the one-day tours, near Santiago, to the San Antonio, Casablanca, Maipo and Colchagua Valleys,’ explains Gilchrist. ‘These tours go hand in hand with a cultural visit to the port of Valparaíso, walks through vineyards and visits to regional museums. People who are just passing through Santiago and have very little time available mostly request these tours. However, in the past six months we have received groups of 10 to 25 people who are visiting Chile and Argentina for 12 or more days. Here we are talking about a wine connoisseur public who prepare their trip many months in advance.’ Her first large group of connoisseurs was a group of 14 Finns, who six months ago visited both Chile and Argentina.

But the most exciting venture to date took place last month, when Gilchrist surprised a group with a tasting on top of a glacier. ‘It was a special surprise within the general programme,’ she says, ‘but we had to quickly bring the activity to an end because the group became very animated and with a cup of wine on a glacier it could have become quite dangerous. It was one of the most entertaining experiences in which I have taken part.’

So if the CPT or Wines of Chile are looking for a poster image that ties in wine, adventure and the breathtaking panoramas that Chile specialises in, they could do worse than to get in touch with the winsome Gilchrist. An urbane, elegant blonde, she is proof that it is possible to live in an urban jungle and still stake a claim in the New World’s Wild West. ■