

The allure of Chile goes way beyond its stunning scenery, dramatic volcanoes and pristine natural wonders; there's cheese too!

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BECAUSE

CHILE

IS THE GREATEST AT THE GREAT OUTDOORS

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Getting away from it all: it's hard to do in this world. And out of this world, come to think of it: people are planning the colonisation of Mars, after all. Even that last great bastion of the charm of travel – the long-lashed, olive-skinned men of Europe – now seem to all speak English with disappointing flawlessness.

Yet there still remain pockets of properly foreign places, where Australians aren't as thickly spread as elsewhere, and I'd put it to you that none is so delightfully hot right now as Chile. And why not? The country is at least as varied and exciting as any in Europe, filled with stunning cities, breathtaking landscapes and good-looking men; even the geography seems to place 'getting away from it all' as a priority of highest billing, stretched as it is down the very edge of the continent and buttressed by soaring mountains and vast national parks from neighbouring Argentina.

And if all of these reasons aren't enough to draw you in, there is also one very particular, very lovely wilderness lodge here

that might just seal the deal. Of course there are plenty of luxury hotels about the world, but this one happens to be set on an artisan dairy farm, where high thread counts and brie are seen as priorities of equal standing.

Like all good stories, Hacienda Hotel Vira Vira started once upon a time when a young boy – a Swiss-German named Michael Paravicini – arrived on a family vacation to the area in 1976. Shortly thereafter he would embark on a high-pressure banking career, the kind that saw him resting his head in the world's most luxurious places and raking in annual frequent flier points by the millions. But even then, he found he could not stop his longing to return to Chile. Indeed the country's Lake District – an area of snow-capped volcanoes and pale green lakes, of clear, sunny summers and glacier-crisp winters – is charmingly fairy tale-like, so much so that Chilean presidents current and former maintain houses here.

So it was that after an early retirement (aged 49, thank you very much), Michael and his wife Claudia eagerly relocated to the area with their three teenage children, and dedicated three solid years to constructing the ultimate

Chilean luxury lodge, set among paddocks and mountains on a sustainable farm and dairy.

To approach this place is an experience in itself. The main building – all avant-garde angles and sexy edges – looks rather improbable among the lush countryside, surrounded by misty-eyed mountaintops and pastures of happy yellows and greens, but it's almost immediately clear that this was no monument to self-aggrandisement. You can practically see the number of hours Michael and Claudia spent daydreaming about creating this place, which have manifested in flashes of inspiration like placing wooden hot tubs in unlikely locations all over the property, so people can sit in steaming hot water and look up at a glacial sky! And let's be honest, only someone with a daydreamer's heart (Swiss banker or not) would sink such time and money into an offering where the economies of scale are tipped so vastly in favour of the very select number of guests they host.

Just 21 rooms make up the property's accommodation; six guest rooms in the chic main building, 12 split-level villas sprawled along a river's edge, and three rooms >>



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Walk to a nearby lake and pause for thought on one of the jetties; One of the little sitting room nooks in the main building; Vira Vira is contemporary while being sympathetic to the landscape. **OPPOSITE:** Cloud-topped Villarrica, one of Chile's most active volcanoes.



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: *A spot in the library to grab a book and read next to a(nother) crackling fire; Vira Vira's horses graze in one of the property's paddocks; The wood-panelled dining space; The forest-lined river is a walker's dream; Striking angles meet natural materials.*



CLOCKWISE FROM THIS IMAGE: *The riverbank where you disembark from your raft after a spot of 'floating'; Walking through a forest of monkey puzzles; Fittings around the property are made by local artisans.*

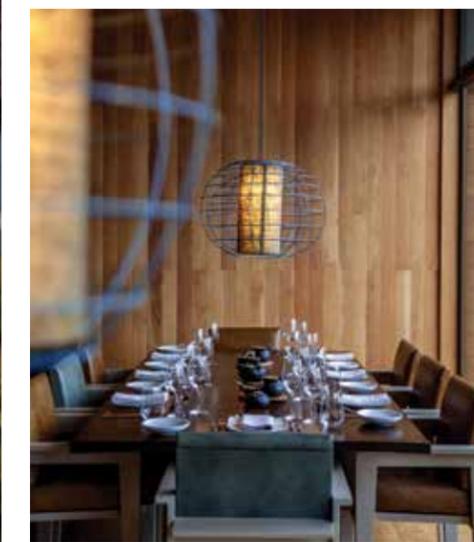


in a separate hacienda. The lot has been fashioned from Lenga, a native blonde timber that lends chalet-style warmth to the high-ceilinged buildings, with interiors that manage to be universally chic but utterly Chilean, complete with bespoke locally designed furniture, modern telares (hanging textured artworks of wood and wool) and, in one bathroom, a two-and-a-half-tonne slab of local granite fashioned into a sink.

Such a sight is Hacienda Hotel Vira Vira to behold on arrival that, despite having been awake for some 24 hours on our journey from Sydney, my compadres and I all suddenly feel well enough to manage a small dinner of just three courses and several glasses of fabulous Chilean merlot, with which we toast repeatedly to our good health.

But the real surprise is in waking the following morning, when the glory of the landscape reveals itself with startling clarity. Thickly forested mountains flank an inky turquoise river that wends through the property; Swiss-gabled cottages dot the distant landscape at intervals that might have been placed by the hand of an artist. Directly in front of my split-level villa is a resplendently bucolic scene complete with grazing horses and clouds that puff past the looming mountain peaks; you could not have engineered a more luxuriously peaceful scene.

Despite its striking appearance, the hotel does little to detract from this atmosphere. Designed to be as harmonious with the surrounds as feasible, the staff farms turkeys, chickens, ducks, geese, wild boar, cows, sheep and goats on the property, using traditional husbandry methods. Later, I learn that there is a second property nearby, which grows wheat, oats, rye and potatoes for both guests and animals, but in those first hours I am content to wander the



enormous organic veggie patches and observe the scenery, which reveals itself during an activity that every guest must take part in.

Vira Vira is located on a parcel of land in the middle of a complicated, crisscrossed river network, where you can hop into a raft and let the tides carry you for an hour and a half before somehow ending up virtually back where you started from. This exercise – which the staff rather charmingly call 'floating' – proves not just an excellent means of orienting yourself with the area, but an enormously pleasurable pursuit. As you float sedately in the water, the picture-

Forested mountains flank an inky turquoise river that wends through the property.

book surrounds are breathtaking; you can see why our banker fell in love with the place.

Indeed, while life revolves around the main lodge – it's where you'll find the restaurant, bar and library, as well as multiple crackling fireplaces in the wintery months – it's the scenery that guests tend to find themselves spending most time in. A regular program of activities is on offer, which varies by day and season (and, one suspects, by the whimsy of program manager Eddie Songer, an outdoors type with ruddy cheeks and broad shoulders) but staff at the activities desk can also help you plan any number of pursuits. And so it

is that we discuss fly fishing on the river and yoga on the outdoor deck before deciding to hike around Tinquilco Lake, a tranquil place of handmade wooden jetties and lovely colourful dinghies placed just so, with all manner of birds singing out to each other, hopping and waddling and flitting about in the cheery sunlight. Then it's on to El Claro, a nearby waterfall some 300 metres high.

On another afternoon we trek to Lake Escondida, a landscape of such wonder that it genuinely looks to belong in another world with its endemic 'monkey puzzle' trees, before retreating back to the lodge, where we sit in a steaming outdoor hot tub, swishing full glasses of merlot as fat rain droplets splash on our heads.

And we eat. Molecular gastronomy is not the style at Vira Vira. The emphasis here is on good, honest food (albeit served degustation style, usually in four courses, with Chilean wines paired to each course). Every meal is presented with at least one form of cheese, as if the staff has made it their personal mission to ensure that despite the fresh air, the vigorous hiking tracks, the daily yoga, and the many gorgeous salads, each guest leaves having inched their belt up at least one notch.

One morning we are lucky enough to be shown through the immaculate dairy; Michael himself leads the tour. He shows us behind two of three doors – door one and two hold a roomful of Grana Padano and gruyère each – but he cannot risk opening door three, he tells us gravely, lest we disrupt the temperature of his most precious child: brie. Something suspiciously un-Swiss zings

across his face: la pasión, I believe they call it. Chile seems to have rubbed off on him.

Indeed it rubs off on me too. During my visit I am fortunate enough to watch as Villarrica – one of Chile's many volcanoes – spits and sputters bursts of steam and lava, resulting in a terribly pretty display. The volcanoes of this area are highly active but – as only Chilean volcanoes can be – the lava oozes as slowly as sloths.

After silently watching the scene a while, I realise it's nearly dark. How does one become so intimately engaged with the art of doing something, when that something is sitting still, doing nothing at all? It is, perhaps, the most delicious part of Chile. And when you're comparing that to the cheese, that's really saying something. *IT*

DETAILS

GETTING THERE

LATAM Airlines flies direct from Sydney to Santiago; from there, it's an 80-minute flight to Temuco, followed by a 100-kilometre drive to Pucon. Vira Vira is 15 minutes from the centre of town. latam.com

STAYING THERE

Rates at Hacienda Hotel Vira Vira start from roughly \$500 per person per night, including breakfast and dinner. The hotel also offers complete packages, including all meals, a wide selection of alcohol, airport transfers and daily excursions, from \$1700 per person for two nights. hotelviravira.com