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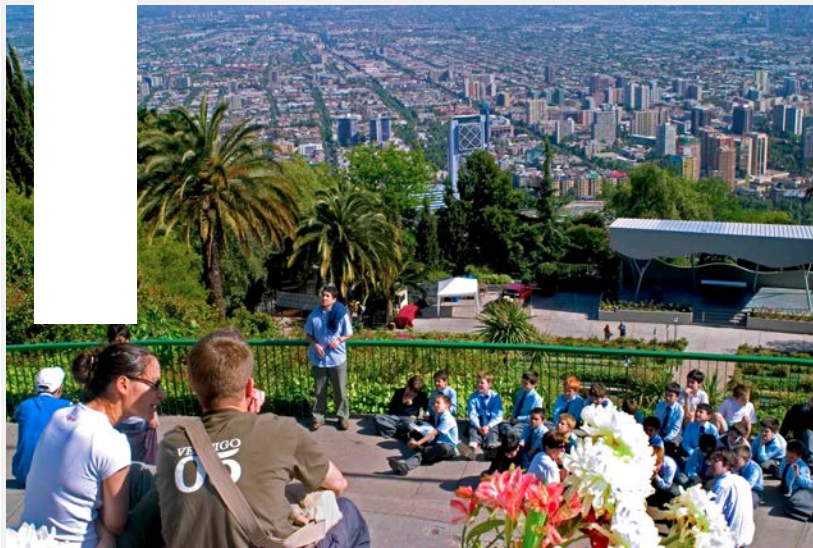
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A South American Surprise: The Subtle Charms Of Santiago, Chile

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The view from San Cristobal Hill

If we're beguiled by South American cities—the seductiveness of Rio, the colonial romance of Cartagena, the edible pleasures of Lima—Santiago typically hasn't been one of them. "We can't compete with Buenos Aires," admitted the manager of the boutique hotel where I recently spent two nights. "Chile is the England of South America," said my tour guide, meaning things are reliable, aboveboard, and orderly—all virtues, to be sure, but not necessarily appealing to travelers who crave a little chaos.

That's why the Chilean capital has been a stopover city, a place to touch down before heading to the wilds of Patagonia or the stark desert of the Atacama. But a recent stay there (compliments of the tourist board)—yes, en route home from Patagonia—showed that the city has charms that make a multiday layover worthwhile.

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Ann Abel

Contributor

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I've been a travel writer and editor for 11 years – including several as a senior editor at ForbesLife – and I've been to more than 300 luxury hotels in 62 countries (and counting). I know the difference between what's merely expensive and what deserves

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guide compared to Paris's Montmartre. Art galleries, cinemas, bars, and ambitious restaurants have been sprouting like wildflowers in the past few years, as well as the city's first boutique hotel (with more on the way). The 14-room [Lastarria](#) opened two years ago in a 1920s private home that's retained its original marble staircase and parquet floors (rooms from \$140).

The hotel serves breakfast, afternoon tea, and cocktails, but for dinner you're forced to explore the neighborhood's restaurants. A dinner of oysters, king crab, prawns, and Sauvignon Blanc at [Nolita](#) proved that while Chile may be the England of South America, when it comes to seafood and wine, it easily outclasses the England of Europe.

The city's more established attractions hold an enduring appeal as well: lunch at the [Mercado Central](#) for fresh seafood (try [Donde Augusto](#), and if abalone is in season, by all means order it); a funicular ride up San Cristobal Hill to see the city and distant Andes from 984 feet up (the train recently reopened after some upgrades); and lunch at the nearby [El Mesón Nerudiano](#), a gathering place for local artists and visitors alike, where the wine list and menu were inspired by poet Pablo Neruda's love of Chile. Sipping a pisco sour in the restaurant's back garden, it's easy to see why he felt as he did.



The rooftop pool at the Lastarria boutique hotel



The dining room at El Mesón Nerudiano

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