

Travel

By the time we got to the wine lands, we had been in Chile more than a fortnight. In Patagonia, we'd driven a thousand miles along the Carretera Austral, the still substantially unpaved road that snakes through the less-visited Aysén region. It was a journey that had taken us from the Southern Patagonian Ice Field and its towering glaciers across the Andes to the Pampas that extends into Argentina, by way of temperate rainforest, extraordinary geological phenomena and some of the most sublime lake-and-mountain scenery I will ever see. It had been a succession of best days of our lives.

From there we had flown 3,500km north to Atacama in the Tropic of Capricorn, where the volcanoes and rock formations in this barren but beautiful desert are perhaps the closest approximation to lunar terrain found on Earth.



Pampas and pampering



"bungalows are not a place for kids or babies. And you can't bring a wheelchair. That's the only problem. It isn't for everybody."

Quite so. Not everyone is going to want to share a room with Dominique Mulhem's lenticular works of Marilyn Monroe and others in "Holograph", nor with the crude bronze of a woman in a deckchair and other nudes in "Shape of Women". I liked its crimson velvet walls, but what with the exaggeratedly curvaceous sofa and the twin-orbed sheepskin stools at the foot of the bed, the theme felt more than a bit laboured. "Boho Pop", on the other hand, has prints and posters by Alexander Calder, Roy Lichtenstein and Tom Wesselmann, and a Zaha Hadid Moon System sofa.

Puro Vik shares its facilities with the existing hotel. Here you'll find the dining and living rooms, as well as a spa, swimming pool, gym and a basement games room, with table tennis and a giant TV.

As at Alto Atacama, where even guided hikes and excursions to distant topographical wonders are included in the rate, Puro Vik is run on a full-board basis, encouraging guests to stay put.

These bungalows are not a place for kids or babies. And you can't bring a wheelchair

Indeed just before we arrived, the European Space Agency had been testing the new Rosalind Franklin rover there in preparation for its deployment on Mars next year. We were braced for disappointment. How could a vineyard possibly compete?

It was dark by the time we arrived at Puro Vik, which opened in March, 170km down the Pan-American Highway from Santiago airport. It is the latest in a small portfolio of architecturally adventurous boutique hotels in Uruguay and Chile that belong to Norwegian activist investor Alexander Vik and are known as Vik Retreats.

On waking next morning, I reached for the pebble-shaped remote control to open the blinds that covered the entirely transparent walls of our "casa", a secluded glass box cantilevered out of wooded hillside. The scene they rose to reveal was not a let-down at all: a serpentine reservoir, part of the by-late-summer quite arid Millahué wetland, lay crowded with white egrets, beyond which rose rugged hills and, in the distance where the valley narrowed, a patchwork of grape fields. Later, as the sun warmed the air, we watched a dozen condors swoop and soar.

Puro Vik consists of just seven discrete units on the 4,325-hectare estate, 383 hectares of it under vineyards. Vik — who is president, chairman and chief executive of the Monaco-based investment fund Sebastian Holdings, a man whose business interests have ranged from insurance, real estate and tech start-ups to the Norwegian vodka brand Christiania and whose wealth Forbes puts at \$1bn — bought it as wilderness and had planted it with vines in 2006. It already produces some of Chile's most revered wines.

Three years later he began to diversify into hotels. He and his American wife Carrie had built a 12-bedroom Spanish-colonial-style ranch in Uruguay (a country they had "fallen in love with", says a blogpost on the Vik Retreats website, on a visit "to introduce Alex's Uruguayan maternal grandmother to their first child"), just inland from the now haute-modish village of José Ignacio, near Punta del Este. It made sense to monetise it when they were not in resi-

Chile | Puro Vik is the latest in a small portfolio of architecturally adventurous boutique hotels created by a Norwegian investor.

Claire Wrathall gets cosy behind the cabin's transparent walls

dence, so in 2009 they turned it into a hotel called Estancia Vik.

Meanwhile they commissioned Uruguayan architect Carlos Ott (best known for the Opéra Bastille in Paris) to build them a beach house a 15-minute drive away on the coast near the beach town of José Ignacio. Ott built a futuristic structure named The Sculpture, with six guest casas in its grounds; it too became a hotel, Playa Vik. A third "retreat" followed, Bahía Vik, up the beach in José Ignacio itself. And later this summer, their first European urban property will open in Milan, within the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II, the city's landmark 19th-century shopping arcade, in what were the Townhouse and Seven Stars hotels, which Vik acquired for a reported €18m last year.

Back in Chile, there has been a hotel, Vik Chile, among his vineyards since 2014. It was, like Puro and indeed Bahía Vik, designed by Montevideo-based Marcelo Daglio Arquitectos, each of its 22 rooms the work of a different artist. (Most are Chilean, though one, in a nod to Vik's nationality, is the work of the late Kjell Nupen). Vik Chile has a bonsai-filled Zen garden and is topped in a swirl of titanium that recalls the buildings of Frank Gehry — not least the hotel Gehry designed for the Marqués de

Above: the black glass wall of each 'casa' reflects the surrounding countryside

Right: artwork in glass by Dale Chihuly in the 'casa' that bears his name

Below: a bath with a view of the winelands at Puro Vik

Below right: set in the adjacent hillside is Vik Chile, with its undulating Gehry-esque metallic roof

Riscal winery in Spain's Rioja region — while its concrete cloister reminded me of Tadao Ando and his contributions to Château La Coste, the art-filled wine estate in Provence.

But the accommodation at Puro Vik offers more privacy and a greater connection with nature than that in the main hotel. Each casa's glass exterior reflects the surrounding woodland so as to disappear into the landscape, an illusion reinforced by their planted roofs. And from inside, all you see is landscape through its transparent walls.

Approached by winding wooden walkways, these buildings speak of modesty and harmony with their environment. Their interiors, however, are something else entirely. Ours, "Letras", has a vibrant palette of red, yellow and green. The sculptural (and unexpectedly comfortable) De Sede chaise longue in one corner is shaped like a giant red-and-white boxing glove; the lamp on the desk is crafted from the headlamp and handlebars of a red Vespa scooter; the safe and a fridge containing water are housed in what looks like a retro petrol pump, its sides painted with the labels of two of the wines made here. And above the bed hang six also red-and-white paintings commissioned from the artist and self-styled sign painter Mike Langley bearing the words Amor/Love, Happiness/Felicidad, Sexo/Sex, Salud/Health, Pesetas/Dollars and Familia/Family, Vik's riff, I'm guessing, on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs.

Compared with the modest lodgings we had grown accustomed to in Patagonia — comfortable family-run places, mostly wooden cabins with roofs of corrugated iron; or even compared with the far glitzier and more expensive Alto Atacama resort we had stayed at in the desert, a huddle of low adobe buildings



around a corral of llamas and alpacas at the foot of the red cliffs of the Catarpe Valley — Puro Vik came as quite a culture shock. But there is no faulting the quality of the furniture or finish. The marble bathrooms, in particular, are a dream. And I grew to love it.

Each casa is different, and some are more conservative than others. "Hiroshige", for instance, is named after the Japanese printmaker Utagawa Hiroshige (1797-1858), four original prints by whom hang above the bed, with tatami mats on the floor and shoji screens along one wall. "Antiquity" has three glass cabinets containing specimens of aragonite, jasper, malachite, labradorite and a 30m-year-old Oligocene sandstone formation known as a "gogotte"; a coffee table of petrified wood; and a bathroom lined in marble embedded with orthocerases, ammonites and other fossils. And "Chihuly" is a fairly restrained tribute to the glass artist Dale Chihuly, whose fragile works are sensibly displayed in vitrines. As the hotel's general manager Pablo Ferral noted as he showed me round, these

DETAILS

Claire Wrathall was a guest of Puro Vik (purovik.com) and tour operator Dehouche (dehouche.com). Puro Vik costs from \$1684 per night, full board, for two people

But beyond walking and riding (there are eight horses, including a foal named Vik) along the marked trails through its vines, almond orchards and valley of cactuses, there's not a lot to do but kick back and look forward to the next meal.

For the cooking here is the best we encountered outside Santiago (though that's a low bar). Lunch is a main course, chosen from a short menu, and dessert, accompanied by glass of La Piu Belle, the sauvignon blanc or rosé (the latter a stonking 14.8 per cent alcohol by volume) made but not grown here; or Milla Cala, its second red. Dinner is a four-course set menu, with the grander Vik cuvée, in our case the powerful 2012.

These were accompanied by a translucent carpaccio of veal with an airy mousse of avocado (even more than grapes, the staple fruit of Chile) and polenta crisps, and some of the best and most artfully presented pasta I have ever eaten. But the Asian-influenced menu on our last night in Chile — bao buns stuffed with pork belly, and ramen with prawns — was less of a triumph. The broth, I thought, lacked depth.

And with that spoonful I realised our big trip had all but ended. Our holiday fantasies of giving it all up and moving to Patagonia, which is what happens, I kept being told, if you taste the blueberry-like fruit of the calafate bush, were finally receding. Away from the sublime, our nit-picking metropolitan mores and mindset had been restored to us and we were back to talking about art and architecture and fancy food and wine. To have flown straight home from the wilderness might have been a culture shock. This way we were able to adjust. As a place to recompress, Puro Vik is ideal.

