

HEAD FOR THE HILLS



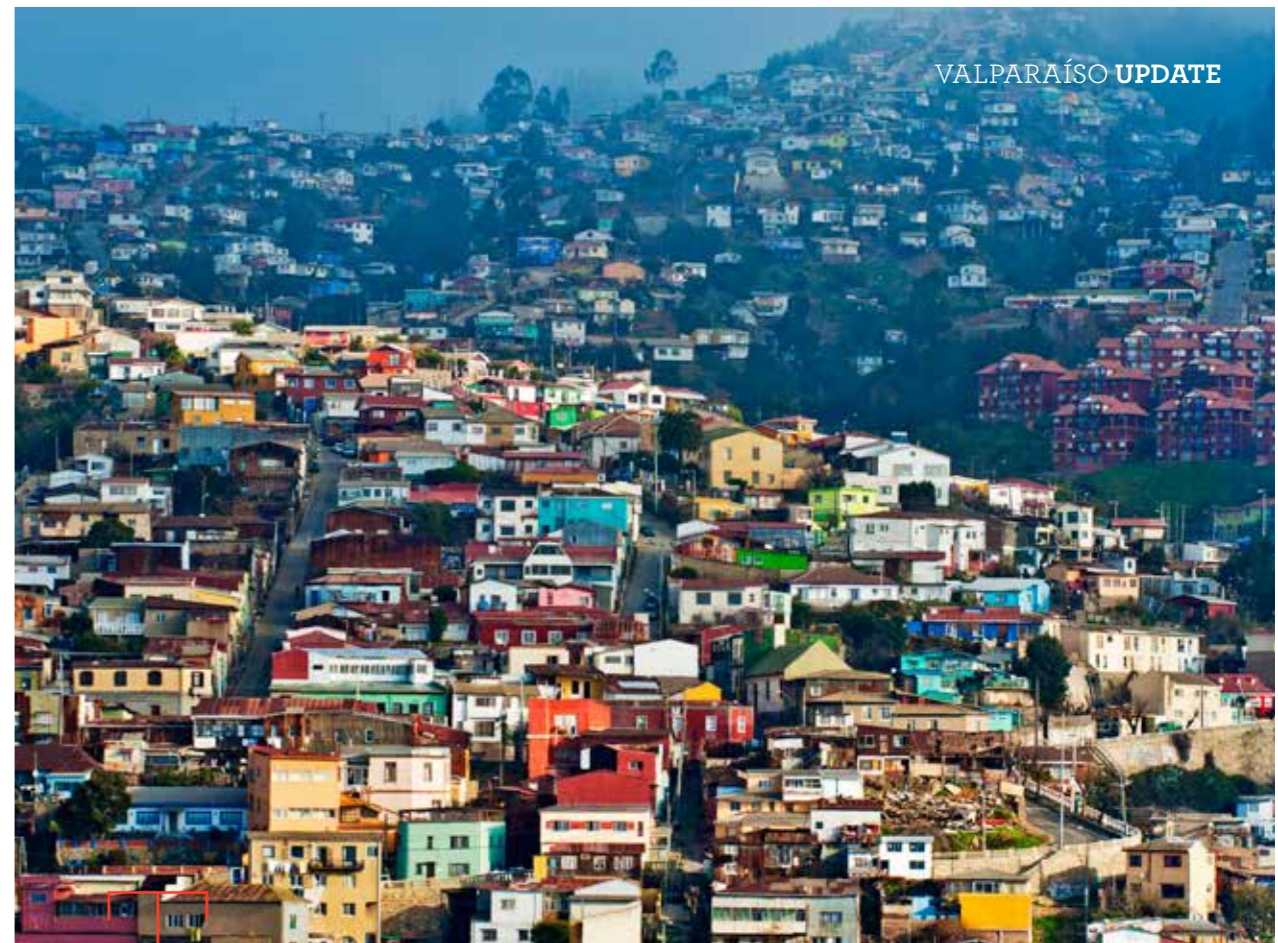
Once a global trading hub known as the “Pearl of the Pacific”, Valparaíso fell on hard times after the opening of the Panama Canal. But following a multimillion-dollar makeover, this Chilean port’s bohemian charm is once more to the fore. WORDS COLIN BARRACLOUGH



Clockwise: Palacio Astoreca; Fine Arts Museum; Pasta e Vino; painted door, Cerro Concepción; Valparaíso Harbour (opposite page)

PALACIO ASTORECA PHOTOGRAPHY: NILS SCHLEBUSCH; FINE ARTS MUSEUM & PASTA E VINO: FERNANDO GOMEZ; CERRO CONCEPCIÓN & HARBOUR: GETTY IMAGES





PHOTOGRAPHY: FERNANDO GOMEZ; HOUSES: GETTY IMAGES

Clockwise from left: Pasta e Vino; Malandrino; Pasta e Vino; Fine Arts Museum; Valparaíso city (above)

HERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT Valparaíso's flawed beauty that lures romantics. UNESCO hinted only at a "distinctive" urban fabric in 2003 when assigning World Heritage status to Chile's idiosyncratic Pacific port, picking out the colourful, shingle-walled townhouses that twist dizzily around the cliffs and ravines of 45 hills as a prime example of vernacular urban development in South America.

Pablo Neruda's take was more lyrical: "What a lunatic, crazy port, what a mane of hills, dishevelled..." the Nobel Prize-winning poet enthused in his *Ode To Valparaíso*, his thrall based as much on the harbour city's complex and unpredictable nature as its aesthetic charms. Neruda holed up in a breeze-swept eyrie on Cerro Bellavista in 1959 - La Sebastiana, his curious hilltop house, is now a much-visited museum - where he wrote passionate missives to the confusion and chaos he observed around him. To the poet's eye, the city's twisting alleys remained forever unswept, the harbour's past grandeur always faded, its mariners perpetually sailing away like departing lovers. For almost 100 years the port has existed in a state of decay and decline. But today, fresh from a multimillion-dollar makeover, Valparaíso is ready for its next act: for the first time in decades, locals believe the future could be as bright as the past.

In the 19th century, the city's commercial success was founded on shipping. An important supply stop

for California-bound vessels, it sported the warehouses, insurers and banks of a global trading hub; by 1880 it had Chile's first stock exchange. Grand plazas lined with ornate stone edifices sprang up on a narrow plain edging Valparaíso Bay. On hillside terraces above, the wealthy erected mansions framed on wood and adobe, their clapboard facades and roofs of corrugated iron easy to replace after frequent earthquakes. Access to the grid below was made by some 24 *ascensores* (funicular railways) or by plunging, pedestrian-only paths so steep as to resemble staircases. Even today, sinuous alleys and staircases still provide the quickest route from one *cerro* (hill) to another, and the best means for visitors to get under the city's skin. If we tramp all of Valparaíso's staircases, wrote Neruda, "we will have circled the world".

In 1914, after the opening of the Panama Canal killed South America's international shipping trade, the city's fortunes plummeted almost overnight. Valparaíso slid into ruin, saved from utter dereliction only by an influx of artists and literary figures. The middle classes decamped en masse to Santiago, tourists to beach resorts such as Viña del Mar and Reñaca, leaving the municipality underfunded and unable to prevent heritage buildings from subsiding, eroding or bursting into flames after a series of natural and man-made disasters. By the 1970s, large pockets of the city had fallen victim to urban blight; neglect had become the norm. ➤

COBBLED STREETS
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CERRO CONCEPCION



The 15-year closure of Valparaíso's Fine Arts Museum, for instance, was typical of the city's downward spiral. Housed in the exuberantly styled mansion of Pascual Baburizza (a nitrates magnate who ploughed his profits into classical European art), the museum closed in 1997 for repairs to cracked walls and a leaking roof. As politicians bickered over the cost and repeatedly postponed the works, termites, floods and seismic tremors threatened the building. "The house was really in appalling shape," says Carlos Lastarria, the museum's curator.

Chile's national government eventually stepped in to put a stop to such misfortunes, setting up a \$US73m citywide recovery program tasked with sprucing up public spaces and buying and restoring historic buildings. The six-year revamp, which ended last December, included the complete refurbishment of the Fine Arts Museum (166 Paseo Yugoslavo, Cerro Alegre, 32 225 2332). The iconic building's red-and-white chequered facade, its copper-roofed towers and art deco interior of fluted wooden fireplaces and oval windows have been impeccably restored. Baburizza's

mostly European art collection has also been expanded to include some fine Chilean oils portraying Valparaíso's 19th-century golden era: key works by Chile's Alfredo Helsby and Enrique Swinburne hang alongside rosily tinted street scenes from Britain's Thomas Somerscales, who spent decades in the city. Outside, the revitalisation of the Paseo Yugoslavo promenade, with its magnificent ocean views, has once again drawn strolling locals.

Most visibly improved are the cobbled streets and twisting alleys that connect Cerro Alegre, Valparaíso's prettiest hill, with Cerro Concepción. Shingle-walled galleries and artists' studios are freshly washed in pastel shades, their once-rusted roofs of corrugated iron newly primed with red oxide. Rustic townhouses lining cobbled artery Calle Almirante Montt – now attractively lit and smartly paved – are largely given over to delicatessens, bars and restaurants specialising in Pacific-catch seafood or traditional Chilean cuisine. Behind its scarlet-painted, corrugated-iron facade, Pasta e Vino has become one of the country's leading restaurants. Newly opened Almacén Nacional, ➤

Cerro Alegre
(above)



where the decor is modelled on an old-fashioned general store, shines with lesser-known local dishes: pork ribs with polenta; quinoa salad; risotto of shrimp and corn mote. At Café Turri, where three terraces enjoy perhaps the most privileged views of Valparaíso Bay, new chef Cristián Gómez lightly grills the best of Chile's seafood catch – tilapia, sea bass and Pacific pomfret – and serves it *à la meunière*.

Other improvements have seen architects converting once-grandiose harbour buildings into lofts and inserting design-minded apartment blocks aimed at wealthy youngsters in formerly down-at-heel districts. Fresh paint in kaleidoscopic hues is visible on private homes throughout the city.

The century-old ascensores have been refitted, including Ascensor Polanco's tile-roofed, ochre-painted tower and the Ascensor Barón (1906), which was the first to use electrical power. Edificio Luis Cousiño, a ship-shaped waterfront building whose fire-racked skeleton was once squatted in by addicts, has been beautifully restored and now houses a university library. Even the city's former prison has taken on a new life as a theatre and cultural centre – at Parque Cultural de Valparaíso (pcdv.cl), old cell blocks now house rehearsal spaces for dancers and musicians.

In October, Swiss filmmaker Vincent Juillerat unveiled the city's best lodgings, a 23-room boutique hotel housed in the Palacio Astoreca, a Victorian Gothic-style mansion built by a saltpetre baron in 1923 to alleviate his English wife's homesickness. Chilean architect Mathias Klotz restored the palacio's porticos and pitched roofs, re-creating interior plasterwork where possible; ornate tracery has been expertly re-crafted in a ground-floor piano bar and wood-panelled, parquet-floored library. A new extension houses a sleek basement spa with a *hammam*, wood-fired hot tub and heated indoor pool. Klotz returned the facade to its original colour: pillar-box red.

Valparaíso will never be a bland tourist town: its grit is too ingrained, its activists and artists too entrenched. Graffiti – so widespread as to be almost a local handicraft – ranges from politically inspired slogans to the Museo a Cielo Abierto (Open-air Museum), a set of murals that brighten Cerro Bellavista staircases. The harbour district retains a rough-and-ready attractiveness, best experienced at Bar La Playa, an atmospheric seamen's bar that opened in 1934. Yet the city's overhaul has halted a seemingly endless decline and allowed Valparaíso, abandoned for decades by most Chileans, to recapture its poetic charm. ➤

View from the terrace of the restored Palacio Astoreca (above)



Fresh local produce at Restaurant Alegre, Palacio Astoreca (also above, right)

STAY

HOTEL PALACIO ASTORECA
149 Montealegre, Cerro Alegre.
(32) 327 7700.

hotelpalacioastoreca.com

This Victorian mansion with its 23 ample rooms retains the feel of a grand old house. From \$250.

ZERO HOTEL

343 Lautaro Rosas, Cerro Alegre.
(32) 211 3113. zerohotel.com

Friendly boutique property on a pretty street, where a glass-fronted conservatory opens to two wooden decks suspended over a cliff. From \$289.

HOTEL ULTRAMAR

173 Pérez, Cerro Cárcel.
(32) 221 0000.

hotultramar.com

This century-old house on Prison Hill has spectacular Pacific views. From \$93.

CASA HIGUERAS

133 Calle Higuera, Cerro Alegre.
(32) 249 7900.

www.casahigueras.com

A sober, wood-panelled townhouse hotel that flows languidly down the Cerro Alegre hillside. From \$235.

EAT

PASTA E VINO

352 Calle Templeman, Cerro Concepción. (32) 249 6187.

The signature dish at this stylish Italian restaurant is duck ravioli with plum-and-port sauce.

CAFÉ TURRI

147 Templeman, Cerro Concepción. (32) 225 2091.

A recent change of ownership and chef has transformed this local favourite. On a sunny day, skip the mahogany-panelled interior for a terrace spot above Valparaíso Bay.

MALANDRINO

532 Almirante Montt, Cerro Concepción.
(32) 318 4827.

Fresh, seasonal ingredients and a wood-burning oven make owner Patricio Caorsi's pizzas exceptional.

ALMACÉN NACIONAL

402 Almirante Montt, Cerro Concepción.
(32) 320 1599.

Traditional Chilean dishes, well-executed and smartly served.

BAR LA PLAYA

567 Serrano, Plaza Sotomayor.
(32) 259 4262.

This old-time seafarers' bar has cheap beer, potent pisco and a raucous atmosphere.

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