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Traditional but modern in Chile

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The season is winding down in Zapallar, the *balneario*, or seaside resort, where Chile's most privileged families have been spending their summers for more than a century.

A 90-minute drive from Santiago, Zapallar combines the theatrical topography of the Ligurian coast with the buzzy community life of the Hamptons. It has a casual elegance and, in spite of the wealth of its residents, you're more likely to see sandy teenagers eating ice cream outside a village general store than taut and tanned socialites flaunting the latest in resort wear.

It's also conservative community - General Augusto Pinochet famously entertained the UK's then-prime minister Margaret Thatcher in Zapallar - and most of its houses are spacious but unremarkable wood or stucco piles with breathtaking views of the Pacific.

Within the last decade, however, the face of the resort has changed. Several residents have developed a taste for contemporary architecture and commissioned shimmering glass boxes that jut from the cliffs. The houses have an international appeal but, from the large rooms and patios set aside for lingering meals to the high level of local craftsmanship, the architecture is distinctly Chilean.

Giselle Theberge first fell in love with Zapallar's low-key chic in the early 1980s, when she was married to the late James Theberge, then US ambassador to Chile. When Theberge returned 15 years later with her new husband, John Jepson, they decided on a whim to buy a modest 1970s two-bedroom bungalow. "The house was a shack. It was run-down and really simple," Theberge recalls. Like much of the property in Zapallar, the lot was small and on a steep gradient but it had a wide view of the ocean. Today, a similarly desirable half-hectare of land might cost 300m pesos (£314,000).

For the renovation they turned to Markus Dochantschi, who was then the project manager for Zaha Hadid Architects and who now heads his own firm in New York, Studio MDA. Dochantschi visited the site while completing the

Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati with Hadid. "It had good spatial relations," he says. "I wanted to take its concept and exaggerate it so that it cantilevered out over the cliffs."

He extended all the rooms, more than doubling their size, and added a bedroom and cornered floor-to-ceiling plate glass windows without mullions so that the view takes an almost cubist edge. He lengthened the deck and set an infinity pool in the middle. There's a six-metre drop from the deck to the ground and, with the right angle and light, it looks as if the pool feeds into the cove below. "He respected the angles the house had," Theberge says. "Wherever you are is in the sea."

But if the view is the focus of a house in Zapallar, the dinner table is its soul. Village social life is vibrant but intensely domestic. And perhaps this was the aim of Legara Ovalle, who created the resort as a residential enclave at the turn of the last century. Zapallar still doesn't have the grand hotel or public attractions common to other beach towns. There are only a handful of restaurants and nothing that comes close to a nightclub. Instead, people go out to the houses of their friends and neighbours. Breakfast ends at 11am, lunch starts at 3pm, dinner begins at 10pm and stretches into the night. And for at least one of those meals the chances are you're either a guest or a host.

Nobody thinks twice about making last-minute plans (before mobile phones, friends often appeared unannounced), so it's helpful if your house can accommodate a jump in the head count. Or you can build a structure such as Asadera Mirador solely for entertaining. It is a Miesian glass pavilion anchored into the hillside at one end and balanced on pine pylons at the other. The building's name means Barbecue View and it provides both: it has an enormous built-in grill and a vertiginous panorama of the steep valley.

Asadera Mirador was designed by Carolina Contreras and Tomás Cortese when they were both just 24. The glass walls give it a deceptive urbanity - a lattice roof made from pine slats is open to the elements then wraps around the far side of the box and becomes the floor. "The intention was to dissolve the distinction of materials between the horizontal and vertical," Cortese says. "This is like a folded terrace." By obscuring one of the views you have no choice but to look inland up the valley or out to the ocean.

Zapallar's contemporary houses have a cosmopolitan flair but the materials are local and often humble: softwood, plaster, brick, concrete block. Also, Chile is in an earthquake zone and seismic engineering is a consideration. Despite these limitations, or because of them, the local contractors are capable artisans and the detail work on the houses is good.

"I'll admit that when I was there I was surprised by the high level of craftsmanship," Dochantschi says. After studying architecture in Germany, he found it easier to work in Chile, where building codes are based on European standards, than in the US. "The level of construction in Chile is excellent. When I presented the contractor with the pool [in Theberge's house], he told me 'You're crazy, but I like you'." The pool went off without a hitch.

Sebastian Gray, a professor of architecture at the Pontificia Universidad Católica in Santiago, the pre-eminent programme in the country, is a champion of a home-grown aesthetic. "I design large houses with inexpensive materials. Local architecture means using local materials and local workers," he says. "If you import images of foreign architecture and try to build it here it looks ridiculous."

Gray designed three houses in Zapallar and two more are under construction. The Casa Simonetti-Cox, also called Casa Negra, is clad in pine clapboards painted with a tar-based primer, and the matte black of the boxy house stands out against the landscape. It's ordered and dramatic: tall windows disappear into deep recesses punched through the façade and indoor rooms open seamlessly on to terraces. "I call it a villa because it's aware of its surroundings," Gray says. It cost 150m pesos to build.

The Casa Addi is far more modest. Made from *ladrillo chonchón* (handmade bricks fired in a wood-burning kiln), every room of the whitewashed bunker opens on to a central patio. A hideaway for a landscape architect, built for only 15m pesos, the spaces are calm and rational, like a colonial adobe hacienda built on a human scale and reorganised by Bauhaus geometry.

Even though Zapallar's most interesting houses have been built within the past decade, there is a precedent for good design. In 1929 TK Matias Errázuriz, the scion of one of the country's most prominent families, commissioned Le Corbusier to design a house. The Casa Errázuriz was never built but it's a benchmark for 83, or Ocho al Cubo, an architectural experiment in Marbella, just south of Zapallar. There are three phases to the project: the first is eight houses, each designed by one of the reigning masters of Chilean architecture; the second is eight houses by famous foreign architects; the third is eight houses by Chile's *avant-garde*.

Phase one is half complete - the fourth house, by Matthias Klotz, was finished last year - and phase two has its first signer-on, the Japanese star Tyo Ito.

The project was generated by Inter-design, a furniture shop in Santiago's tiny Las Condes neighbourhood, and the promotion has been meticulous; all the houses are fitted with furniture and lighting from the store.

"They're trying to create good architecture as a market product," says Æ, Æ-Alejandro Aravena, a professor at the Pontificia Universidad Católica who until recently taught at Harvard University's Graduate School of Design. "Instead of depending on the individual who chooses a good architect, they're building a market for good architecture."

Prêt-a-porter architecture by couture architects is being tried elsewhere but 83 may be hindered by its location - Marbella is an American-style development centred around a golf course. Instead of steep, shady roads, the houses of 83 are grouped on a cul-de-sac and included in the purchase price of each is a golf cart. Chileans may be embracing good design but not at the cost of what makes Zapallar so attractive and unique.