Claudio Baez, a young Chilean police detective, is staring at photographs on his computer screen.
One looks like a holiday snapshot — two young men smiling in front of the Sagrada Familia in Barcelona. Another selfie shows a man holding a bundle of €500 notes in his hand like a fan.

We are in a police office in Santiago, the Chilean capital, where Baez works in a plain-clothes unit. He is a specialist in a new type of burglary. It has its origins in Chile but its victims live in countries thousands of miles away. The men in these photographs are “crime tourists”.

They travel the world burgling expensive homes, often posting part of their haul back to Chile — luxury watches, jewellery, designer clothes — and brazenly posting snapshots of it and the tourist attractions they visit on social media. “Criminals were discreet in the old days,” Baez says, “but these young millennials like to show it all off on social media. They’re like the rock stars of crime in this country. They come home with lots of money after living it up in Europe. They wear Italian clothes, lots of jewellery and they drive fancy cars.”

Recently they have been very busy in Britain, where the Wimbledon home of the celebrity chef Marcus Wareing was ransacked last year by four young Chileans who flaunted their loot on Facebook. Britain has deported hundreds of suspected crime tourists over the past two years — and jailed dozens of others. The gangs, however, keep coming back, creating an ever-expanding caseload for our police as well as for Chile’s anti-robbery unit in Santiago, which is trying to help stop Chileans taking lucrative burglary holidays in the UK.
On a high note: a Chilean criminal displays his latest haul of euros on Facebook

What draws them to Britain? According to Jorge Sanchez, head of the Chilean unit, they regard it as easy pickings. “People in Europe are more trusting than they are here in Chile,” he tells me. “They leave bags unattended, they take fewer precautions with their homes.” Daniel Morales, another member of the team, chips in: “Yeah, the Chilean criminal sees all this and thinks, ‘Wow! They’re giving their stuff to me!’ ”

The risk of being jailed in the UK does not seem to bother them. “It’s like a hotel for them compared with here,” Morales says. “And it’s something to brag about afterwards — it gives them enormous status when they come home.”

Then there is the ease with which they can slip from one European country into another. “There are no controls in the Schengen area,” Morales says. “In Germany if they are caught they are invited to go before a tribunal. They don’t go, obviously. They change country.”
In Austria, for example, they ask the consulate for a new passport. We have to be super-attentive to this. The police in these European countries don’t seem to talk much to each other.”

He and Baez are tasked with following the extraordinarily brazen trail left by the culprits on social media, but it is still difficult to pin them down. “They all use false names on Facebook, and sometimes even in Arabic script,” Baez says. “This guy, for instance, Eduardo — we know that’s not his real name.” He points again at his screen. “Here he is in Barcelona at the Sagrada Familia.” Other crime tourists have posted pictures of themselves outside Notre Dame in Paris.

Data trail: officers Claudio Baez (front) and Daniel Morales scour social media in Santiago

On another screen Macarena Olivares, a team member, stares at a Facebook photo of a young, blonde Chilean woman in tight jeans who is wanted by the FBI for burglaries committed in America. “You can tell what she’s spent her loot on — look! She’s had her boobs done,” she exclaims with a laugh.
Another job of this team is to recover stolen valuables brought back by the crime tourists. Besides the monetary value, some items they have recovered must have immense sentimental importance. Baez calls up another photograph of a thick silver bracelet, stolen from a home in Britain last year. It is inscribed “Love You Nanny, Love Lottie and Laiken”. It was found on the wrist of a young Chilean returning to Santiago from London on December 31. He had been intercepted by police as a potential suspect in other burglaries. The real owner has since been identified in the UK and the bracelet will be returned once the forms are completed.

Another Chilean success was the recent interception of a package of stolen goods from Australia. Obligingly the robbers had included among the expensive watches being sent home to their family a printed photograph of themselves smiling at a restaurant table. “It was a sort of greeting to the family, but obviously now a useful piece of evidence,” Baez says. “We couldn’t believe our luck.”

Fingers burnt: the chef Marcus Wareing was targeted

In Britain, the crime tourism phenomenon, first reported by The Times in 2018, began with the burglaries of homes in London, Oxford and the southeast. Down the
road from Wareing’s home, the multimillion-pound gated mansion of the Crystal Palace defender Mamadou Sakho was also raided while he was away with his wife and their three children after Christmas. The crime tourists have also been active in the north, with Chilean thieves carrying out at least eight raids in the “Golden Triangle” area of Wilmslow, Alderley Edge and Prestbury, home to other multimillionaire footballers.

Victims Mamadou Sakho and his wife, Majda

Last month two Chilean men who carried out a string of break-ins worth £170,000 in the area were jailed after targeting the former Premier League goalkeeper Tomasz Kuszczak’s mansion for the second time. Jorge Pinto Vallejos, 27, and Jamie Duarte Vera, 40, ransacked houses in Alderley Edge and Prestbury in the weeks running up to Christmas last year — opening all of one family’s Christmas presents and making off with a haul worth £44,000. They were jailed for three years and eight months and three years and four months respectively for their roles in an organised crime group.
Amanda Blakeman, deputy chief constable for the National Police Chiefs’ Council, says: “We have seen a small number of burglaries where criminals have travelled from abroad specifically with the intention of targeting high-value properties in the UK. This particular crime is typically carried out by organised gangs who have researched their targets in advance.”

Some crime experts have speculated that the gangs are directed by a Chilean “Mr Big” in Santiago, who pays their air fares and takes the lion’s share of the loot. But the anti-robbery unit’s Sanchez is sceptical. “These criminals rely on local people to help them in the UK,” he says. “Some of these locals are Chileans. They know the places to go. Sometimes they set up small gangs. Chileans are good at what they do — some of them are specialists in different types of robberies, so occasionally they get recruited by other gangs.”

To find out more about this new breed of criminal I leave the detectives and head out into the sprawling metropolis of six million people, one of the richest cities in South America. I am hoping to track down some of the crime tourists’ families.

It is before the lockdown and for months Santiago, nestling in the shadow of the Andes, has been engulfed by mass protests. A whiff of tear gas hangs over the central square, which looks as though a hurricane has passed over it. All the paving stones have been torn up and the entrance to the metro is under rubble. A group of students sit by the statue of a 19th-century general on horseback that they have painted with their slogan, “Victory or death!”

Dozens of protesters have been killed, thousands injured and all around is strewn the debris of battle: rocks, tear-gas canisters, an abandoned shoe. Shops are boarded up, buildings and trees scorched by fire. Much of this rage is directed against the centre-right president, Sebastian Piñera, a Harvard-educated billionaire upholding the country’s once-vaunted “neoliberal” model that brought rapid riches but has left many Chileans hungry for a bigger share of prosperity.
From top: “Eduardo” takes in the Sagrada Familia in Barcelona, while another suspect shows off expensive cars
“It’s easier to defeat poverty than it is to satisfy the demands of the giant new class of people who are better off than their parents were and want their children to be better off than them,” the former Chilean president Ricardo Lagos, 82, had told me when he invited me to tea the day before.

Looking at all the destruction in the city centre, I wonder what conditions will be like in the city’s far-flung suburbs, hotbeds of gang violence and no-go zones for police. This, according to Sanchez, is where the crime tourists have their roots.

He had advised me against visiting, but, if I insisted, to go before 11am, when young gang members monitoring traffic in and out of the barrio would probably be curled up in bed. I am armed with a few addresses gleaned from police records, including those of the Chileans who broke into Wareing’s home last October. They made off with stolen items worth £33,711, including a pair of £520 Christian Louboutin shoes belonging to Wareing’s wife, Jane, and a locket containing pictures of her father and uncle when they were young.

The men were arrested shortly after the heist on their way to another raid in October last year and admitted conspiracy to burgle. The court was told that three orange dots had been sprayed onto the back fence of the Wareing house to identify it as a high-value property. Sentencing the four men to three years and four months in prison, Jonathan Davies, the judge at Kingston crown court, said that they had “heaped misery” on the Wareings, adding: “No one should be under an illusion that the UK is a soft touch.” Referring to the orange dots, he said: “I mention that so others are made aware to be on their guard.”
The taxi driver parks us at the corner of a warehouse beside a weed-infested vacant lot. “If there’s any trouble, I’m not waiting,” he informs me as I get out.

Carlos Valdovinos Avenue looks deserted. I knock at a door, supposedly the address of Jorge Rojas. He had a criminal record in Chile for armed robbery and was deported last year from America, then denied entry to Germany. He was arrested last October in the UK wearing a gold pendant belonging to Jane Wareing. An elderly man in a string vest opens the door, surprised to see a foreigner with a notebook.

“No, I don’t know who that is,” he says when I ask about Rojas. He claims, though, to have heard on TV about “that famous English chef” and the robbery. He leans in, conspiratorially, and adds: “Ask the people next door, I think that might be part of his family — but I didn’t say anything, right?”
A mangy dog trots past on the pavement as I knock at the next door down. A woman opens it: “Who are you?” I can see a pile of cardboard boxes at the back of a darkened room. Another woman seems to be going through them and I wonder if this might be part of another overseas haul. Then the woman explains that she and her friend have just moved in. “There’s no Rojas family here.”

My next stop is 113 Ludwig van Beethoven Street, the address of another of the Wareing robbers, 20-year-old Danko Carvajal-Donaire. He had been arrested in Spain for identity theft in 2019 and deported from Rome before heading to Britain, according to Interpol. He has obviously given a fake address — Ludwig van Beethoven Street exists, but there is no number 113.

By now it is approaching midday and the streets are coming to life. We drive into a warren of narrow, unpaved alleys packed densely with little houses behind high metal gates. Young men lounge in plastic chairs on one corner, staring suspiciously as we pass by. I’m looking for the home of Claudio Donoso, 20, another of the Wareing burglars.

I ring a doorbell and a woman on the other side of the gate asks what I want. At first she claims that she has nothing to do with the Donoso family. When I reassure her that I am not from the police, she opens the gate and asks me in.

A gleaming black car is parked in the driveway. The woman, middle-aged, dressed in red shorts, calls herself Claudia and claims she is Donoso’s aunt. He had been living with her for five years before going to Europe, she says.

Inside two young boys sit on a green velvet sofa — “his little cousins”, says the aunt. She goes on: “Claudio was a studious boy, he was doing very well at school, but then his dad, who was a schizophrenic, killed himself. Then his girlfriend, Brandy, left him. She broke his heart. He fell into a deep depression after that.”
A smell of cooking emanates from a small kitchen at the back of the house as the woman continues her narrative, describing how one day Donoso received a telephone call from his friend Carvajal-Donaire, who would end up posing with an accomplice on Facebook with jewellery stolen from the Wareings.

“He said to Claudio, ‘Let’s go to Europe, I hear it’s great fun over there,’ ” the aunt recalls. “He wanted to see the world, have a good time, he packed his bag and off they went. It was only a few months ago. He’s never had any trouble with the law before. It was that friend who got him into trouble over there in England.”

Since Donoso was imprisoned he has re-established contact with the girlfriend, according to the aunt. “She’s running back to him now that he’s famous — they speak most days, apparently.”

Her comments remind me of what Baez had said about the crime tourists enjoying rock-star status in Chile. UK prisons might not be quite the holiday camps they had imagined, however: “Claudio tells Brandy that they don’t give him enough food,” the aunt says. “And he is only allowed outside for one hour a day.” She sounds proud of him. “Send him lots of kisses from me,” she says when she learns I am returning to Britain.
A suspect shows off weaponry

On the other side of the city I come to another metal gate. It is opened by a young woman with a large white German shepherd. She invites me into a dark sitting room dominated by a giant flatscreen TV.

I’m looking for Ailin Miranda, 22, who was jailed in Britain after robbing a house in Oxford, but the woman in front of me identifies herself as Belen Perez.

We sit on plastic furniture as she explains that her brother, Julio, has two children with Miranda, a boy of seven and a six-year-old girl. “She left the kids here four years ago, saying she was going to get a nose job,” Perez says. “The kids often ask when their mum is coming back. We say, ‘She’s working, she’ll come back soon,’ but she hasn’t. My parents look after the kids. I’ve no idea where Ailin is.”

I ask if she knows that Miranda had been robbing houses in Britain. “It doesn’t surprise me,” she says. She calls her “armed and dangerous”, adding that her name was in the Chilean news in 2018 after a shoot-out with police.
She believes that Miranda has two other children, one living with a grandmother in Switzerland. As for her brother, “he sends us money from time to time”, she says, adding that he is “less disorganised” than Miranda. She announces, proudly, that he, like Miranda, has been in the UK, adding: “He travels a lot.”

When I return to the police office the next day, Sanchez says he has stationed one of his officers at the Chilean embassy in London to liaise with British police. His team passes information to London about potentially suspicious young Chileans on their way out of the country, and the embassy lets them know about equally suspicious returnees. “I’m sure the word is getting around that the UK is not a safe place for them.”

A global recession linked to the pandemic will not help. “There will be a lot more unemployment,” says a western diplomat in Santiago, “with the possibility that more and more Chileans search for an easy way out.”

Watch out for the three orange dots.