

The Best of South America

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Whether you're an archaeology buff, an outdoor adventurer, or a partyer in search of a good time, South America presents so many diverse travel options that it'll make your head spin. We'll help you plan a memorable trip, starting with our highly opinionated lists of the best experiences the continent has to offer.

1 The Most Unforgettable Travel Experiences

- **Visiting Iguazú (Iguaçu) Falls:**

One of the world's most spectacular sights, Iguazú boasts more than 275 waterfalls fed by the Iguazú River, which can (and should) be visited from both the Argentine and the Brazilian sides. In addition to the falls, Iguazú encompasses a marvelous subtropical jungle with extensive flora and fauna. See "Iguazú Falls" in chapter 4 and "Iguaçu Falls" in chapter 6.

- **Traveling the Wine Roads of Mendoza:**

Less commercialized than their European and North American counterparts, Mendoza's wineries are free to visit and easily accessible along roads known locally as *los Caminos del Vino*. There are about 80 wineries that formally offer tours and tastings. Be sure to try the region's famed Malbec. See "Mendoza" in chapter 4.

- **Walking in the Sun's footsteps on the Isla del Sol:**

The Incas trace their roots from Manco Capac and Mama Ocllo, the children of the Sun. Supposedly, the Sun stepped forth onto the Sun

Island in Lake Titicaca to give birth to the first Incas. Nowadays, on the northwestern tip of the Sun Island, you can walk right up to rock formations that look like footsteps, which according to legend, were left here when the Sun came down to Earth to drop off Manco Capac and Mama Ocllo. See "Lake Titicaca" in chapter 5.

- **Celebrating Carnival in Rio:**

The biggest party in the world. Whether you dance it out on the streets, watch the thousands of participants in their elaborate costumes in the samba parade, or attend the fairy-tale Copacabana Palace ball, this is one event not to miss! See "Rio de Janeiro" in chapter 6.

- **Observing red macaws at sunset:**

The sunset over the red rock formations in the Chapada dos Guimarães north of Cuiabá in Brazil is a magical experience in itself. Even more special is the view of scarlet macaws working the thermals off the sheer cliffs in the warm glow of the setting sun. See "The Pantanal" in chapter 6.

- **Exploring the madcap streets of Valparaíso:** The ramshackle, sinuous streets of Valparaíso offer a walking tour unlike any other. Valparaíso could be called the penniless older brother of San Francisco, California, and part of the fascination here is touring the faded remains of this once-thriving port town. Antique Victorian mansions and colorful tin houses line terraced walkways that wind around precipitous hills—to get to the top, there are a handful of 1900s funiculars. Sweeping views and atmospheric restaurants and cafes can be found at every turn, but Valparaíso's bars, which seem to have authored the word “bohemian,” are what have brought this city notoriety. See “Around Santiago & the Central Valley” in chapter 7.
- **Sailing past the islands and fiords of southern Chile:** Quietly sailing through the lush beauty of Chile's southern fiords is an experience that all can afford. There are two breathtaking trajectories: a 3-day ride between Puerto Natales and Puerto Montt, and a 1- to 6-day ride to the spectacular Laguna San Rafael Glacier. Backpackers on a shoestring (as well as those who need spiffier accommodations) all have options. These pristine, remote fiords are often said to be more dramatic than those in Norway. Farther south, a small cruise line takes passengers through Tierra del Fuego and past remote glaciers, peaks, and sealion colonies, stopping at the end of the world in Puerto Williams. See “The Chilean Lake District” in chapter 7.
- **Watching blue-footed boobies dance for love in the Galápagos:** Birds are usually shy, especially during mating season. But in the Galápagos Islands, where wild

animals have no fear of humans, you can watch male blue-footed boobies spread their wings, lift their beaks, and dance wildly in a performance known as “sky pointing,” all in the hope of attracting a mate. If the female likes what she sees, she'll do the same. It's a scene right out of a *National Geographic* documentary. See “The Galápagos Islands” in chapter 8.

- **Floating on Lake Titicaca:** Lake Titicaca, the world's highest navigable body of water, straddles the border between Peru and Bolivia. To locals, it is a mysterious and sacred place. A 1-hour boat ride from Puno takes you to the Uros floating islands, where communities dwell upon soft patches of reeds. Visitors have a rare opportunity to experience the ancient cultures of two inhabited natural islands, Amantani and Taquile, by staying with a local family. You won't find any cars or electricity here, but there are remarkable local festivals. The views of the oceanlike lake, at more than 3,600m (12,000 ft.) above sea level, and the star-littered night sky alone are worth the trip. See “Puno & Lake Titicaca” in chapter 9.
- **Gazing upon Machu Picchu:** However you get to it—whether you hike the fabled Inca Trail, hop aboard one of the prettiest train rides in South America, or zip in by helicopter—Machu Picchu more than lives up to its reputation as one of the most spectacular sites on earth. The ruins of the legendary “lost city of the Incas” sit majestically among the massive Andes, swathed in clouds. The ceremonial and agricultural center, never discovered or looted by the Spanish, dates from the mid-1400s but seems even more ancient. Exploring the site is a

thrilling experience, especially at sunrise, when dramatic rays of light creep over the mountaintops. See “The Sacred Valley of the Incas” in chapter 9.

- **Visiting Punta del Este in summer:** As *Porteños* (residents of Buenos Aires) will tell you, anyone who’s anyone from Buenos Aires heads to Punta del Este for summer vacation. The glitzy Atlantic coast resort in Uruguay is packed with South America’s jet set from December through February and offers inviting beaches and outstanding nightlife. See “Punta del Este” in chapter 10.
- **Enjoying the splendor of Angel Falls:** From the boat ride through rapids in a dugout canoe, to the steep hike from the river’s edge to the base of the falls, to a swim in

the cool waters at the foot of this natural wonder and back again, this is an amazing experience, with spectacular views and scenery throughout. See “Canaima, Angel Falls & the Gran Sabana” in chapter 11.

- **Riding El Teleférico in Mérida, Venezuela:** The world’s highest and longest cable car system will bring you to the summit of Pico Espejo at 4,765m (15,629 ft.). If you’ve ever wanted to get into thin air without the toil of actually climbing there, this is the way to go. Go early if you want the best views. But be careful: The effects of altitude can be felt, whether or not you actually climb. See “Mérida, the Andes & Los Llanos” in chapter 11.

2 The Best Small Towns & Villages

- **San Martín de los Andes, Argentina:** City planners in San Martín had the smart sense to do what Bariloche never thought of: limit building height to two stories and mandate continuity in the town’s Alpine architecture. The result? Bariloche is crass whereas San Martín is class, and the town is a year-round playground to boot. The cornucopia of hotels, restaurants, and shops that line the streets are built of stout, cinnamon-colored tree trunks or are Swiss-style, gingerbread confections that all seem right at home in San Martín’s blessed, pastoral setting. Relax, swim, bike, ski, raft, hunt, or fish—this small town has it all. See “The Argentine Lake District” in chapter 4.
- **The Isla del Sol, Bolivia:** There are actually several small villages on the Sun Island, but in total, only a few thousand people live here. There are no cars and barely any telephones. At rush hour, things get very chaotic: You may have to wait a few minutes while the locals herd their llamas from one end of the island to the other. Spend a day here, and you’ll feel as if you have taken a trip back in time. See “Lake Titicaca” in chapter 5.
- **Porto de Galinhas, Brazil:** This village of three streets in a sea of white sand is the perfect spot to learn to surf. You’ll never get cold, while steamed crab and fresh tropical juices between waves do wonders to keep you going. See “Recife & Olinda” in chapter 6.
- **Morro de São Paulo, Brazil:** situated on a green lush island just a boat ride away from Salvador, this sleepy village offers some of the best laidback beach life on the northeast coast of Brazil. Car-free and stress-free, Morro de São Paulo offers the perfect mix of deserted beaches, watersports, and

fun nightlife in an idyllic setting. See “A Side Trip from Salvador” in chapter 6.

- **San Pedro de Atacama, Chile:** Quaint, unhurried, and built of adobe brick, San Pedro de Atacama has drawn Santiaguinos and expatriates the world over to experience the mellow charm and New Age spirituality that waft through the dusty roads of this town. San Pedro hasn't grown much over the past 10 years—it has simply reinvented itself. Its location in the driest desert in the world makes for starry skies and breathtaking views of the weird and wonderful land formations that are just a stone's throw away. See “The Desert North” in chapter 7.
- **Pucón, Chile:** Not only was Pucón bestowed with a stunning location at the skirt of a smoking volcano and the shore of a glittering lake, it's also Chile's self-proclaimed adventure capital, offering so many outdoor activities that you could keep busy for a week. But if your idea of a vacation is plopping yourself down on a beach, Pucón also has plenty of low-key activities, and that is the real attraction here. You'll find everything you want and need without forfeiting small-town charm (that is, if you don't come with the Jan-Feb megacrowds). Timber creates the downtown atmosphere, with plenty of wood-hewn restaurants, pubs, and crafts stores, blending harmoniously with the forested surroundings. See “The Chilean Lake District” in chapter 7.
- **Baños, Ecuador:** This is the perfect place to get away from it all. Baños is only about 3 hours from Quito, but it feels like it's on a different planet. This tiny little town sits right below an active volcano, and the lush green countryside serves as a fantastic backdrop. Most people come here to relax or enjoy outdoor activities, such as rafting or hiking. The weather is almost always perfect—never too hot or too cold. See “Baños” in chapter 8.
- **Ollantaytambo, Peru:** One of the principal villages of the Sacred Valley of the Incas, Ollanta (as the locals call it) is a spectacularly beautiful place along the Urubamba River; the gorge is lined by agricultural terraces, and snow-capped peaks rise in the distance. The ruins of a formidable temple-fortress overlook the old town, a perfect grid of streets built by the Incas, the only such layout remaining in Peru. See “The Sacred Valley of the Incas” in chapter 9.
- **Colonia del Sacramento, Uruguay:** Just a short ferry trip from Buenos Aires, Colonia is Uruguay's best example of colonial life. The old city contains brilliant examples of colonial wealth and many of Uruguay's oldest structures. Dating from the 17th century, this beautifully preserved Portuguese settlement makes a perfect day trip. See “A Side Trip to Colonia del Sacramento” in chapter 10.
- **Mérida, Venezuela:** Nestled in a narrow valley between two immense spines of the great Andes Mountains, this lively college town is a great base for a wide range of adventure activities. Its narrow streets and colonial architecture also make it a great place to wander around and explore. See “Mérida, the Andes & Los Llanos” in chapter 11.
- **Canaima, Venezuela:** This isolated indigenous village sits on the edge of a black-water lagoon fed by a series of impressive waterfalls. The lagoon and its rivers offer

access to even more spectacular waterfalls, including the world's tallest, Angel Falls, as well as the region's distinctive tabletop mesas,

or *tepui*s. See "Canaima, Angel Falls & the Gran Sabana" in chapter 11.

3 The Best Outdoor Adventures

- **Discovering Iguazú Falls by raft:**

This is a place where birds like the great dusky swift and brilliant morpho butterfly spread color through the thick forest canopy. You can easily arrange an outing into the forest once you arrive in Iguazú. See "Puerto Iguazú & Iguazú Falls" in chapter 4.

- **Raging down the Mendoza River:**

Mendoza offers the best white-water rafting in Argentina, and during the summer months, when the snow melts in the Andes and fills the Mendoza River, rafters enjoy up to class IV and V rapids. Rafting is possible year-round, but the river is colder and calmer in winter months. See "Mendoza" in chapter 4.

- **Biking the most dangerous road in Bolivia:**

The 97km (60-mile) road that descends nearly 1,800m (6,000 ft.) from the barren high-plateau area of La Paz to the lush tropical area of Los Yungas is considered one of the most dangerous roads in the world. It's unpaved, narrow, and carved out of the edge of a cliff (without any guardrails). The road recently has become a popular mountain-biking challenge. The views are unbelievable, but don't stare at them too long—you have to keep an eye out for speeding trucks coming at you from the other direction. See "La Paz" in chapter 5.

- **Horseback riding in the Pantanal:**

The world's largest floodplain is best explored cowboy-style on horseback. Spend some time quietly observing the many large bird species and every now and then take off on a fast gallop

through the wetlands, startling alligators and snakes underfoot. See "The Pantanal" in chapter 6.

- **Hang gliding in Rio:** Running off the edge of a platform with nothing between you and the ground 800m (2,624 ft.) below requires a leap of faith, but once you do, the views of the rainforest and beaches are so enthralling that you almost forget about the ground until your toes touch down on the sand at São Conrado beach. See "Rio de Janeiro" in chapter 6.

- **Kayaking the Brazilian Amazon:**

Perhaps the best way to really get in touch with the rainforest is by good old sea kayak. Drifting down an Amazon tributary, you have the time to observe the rainforest, to search the trees for toucans, macaws, and sloths, and to scout the water for anaconda and caiman. On daytime hikes, you explore and swim in rarely visited Amazon waterfalls. To truly make like a researcher, you can hoist yourself 60m (197 ft.) into the treetops, and spend some time exploring the rainforest canopy. See "Manaus & the Amazon" in chapter 6.

- **Trekking in Torres del Paine:**

This backpacking mecca just keeps growing in popularity, and it's no wonder. Torres del Paine is one of the most spectacular national parks in the world, with hundreds of kilometers of trails through ever-changing landscapes of jagged peaks and one-of-a-kind granite spires, undulating meadows, milky, turquoise lakes and rivers, and mammoth glaciers.

The park has a well-organized system of *refugios* and campgrounds, but there are also several hotels, and visitors can access the park's major highlights on a day hike. See "Patagonia" in chapter 7.

- **Snorkeling in the Galápagos:**

The sea lions in the Galápagos are a curious bunch. Once you put on a snorkeling mask and flippers, these guys will think you're one of the gang and swim right up to you. When you aren't playing with sea lions, you'll have the chance to see hammerhead sharks, penguins, sea turtles, and some of the most colorful fish in the world. See "The Galápagos Islands" in chapter 8.

- **Hiking the Inca Trail:** The legendary trail to Machu Picchu, the Camino del Inca, is one of the world's most rewarding eco-adventures. The arduous 42km (26-mile) trek leads across phenomenal Andes mountain passes and through some of the greatest natural and man-made attractions in Peru, including dozens of Inca ruins, dense cloud forest, and breathtaking mountain scenery. The trek has a superlative payoff: a sunset arrival at the glorious ruins of Machu Picchu, laid out at your feet. See "The Sacred Valley of the Incas" in chapter 9.

- **Exploring the Peruvian Amazon:** More than half of Peru is Amazon rainforest, and the country has some of the richest biodiversity on the planet. Cusco is the gateway to the southeastern jungle and two principal protected areas, Tambopata and the Manu Biosphere Reserve. Manu is the least accessible and least explored jungle in Peru, with unparalleled opportunity for viewing wildlife and more than 1,000 species of

birds, but it's not easy or cheap to get to. Iquitos leads to the accessible northern Amazon basin, with some of the top jungle lodges in the country. Ecotourists can fish for piranhas and keep an eye out for pink dolphins, caiman, and tapirs. One of the best jungle experiences is viewing the dense forest from the heights of a rickety canopy walkway. See "The Southern Amazon: Manu & Tambopata" and "Iquitos & the Northern Amazon" in chapter 9.

- **Scuba diving in Los Roques,**

Venezuela: Los Roques offers much of the same coral, marine life, and crystal clear waters as the rest of the popular Caribbean dive destinations, but it's still virtually undiscovered. There are only two dive operations on the islands, and plenty of dive sites to go around. **Sesto Continente** (C/fax 0212/632-9411; www.scdr.com) has the best equipment and the most experience diving the archipelago. See "Los Roques National Park" in chapter 11.

- **One-stop adventure travel from**

Mérida, Venezuela: With a half dozen or so peaks 4,500m (15,000 ft.) and above, raging rivers, and a couple of very competent adventure tour outfitters, you can go climbing, trekking, mountain biking, white-water rafting, horseback riding, canyoneering, and even paragliding out of Mérida. You may need a couple weeks to do it all, but both **Arassari Treks** (www.arassari.com) and **Natoura Adventure Tours** (www.natoura.com) can help you come up with an adventure package to fit your budget, skill level, and time frame. See "Mérida, the Andes & Los Llanos" in chapter 11.

4 The Most Intriguing Historical Sites

- **Manzana de las Luces**, Buenos Aires: The Manzana de las Luces (Block of Lights) served as the intellectual center of the city in the 17th and 18th centuries. This land was granted in 1616 to the Jesuits, who built San Ignacio—the city’s oldest church—still standing at the corner of Bolívar and Aslina streets. Worth a visit to see the beautiful altar. See p. 98.
- **Teatro Colón**, Buenos Aires: The majestic Teatro Colón, completed in 1908, combines a variety of European styles, from the Ionic and Corinthian capitals and French stained-glass pieces in the main entrance to the Italian marble staircase and exquisite French furniture, chandeliers, and vases in the Golden Hall. The Colón has hosted the world’s most important opera singers. See p. 100.
- **Tiwanaku**, Bolivia: The Tiwanaku lived in Bolivia from 1600 B.C. to A.D. 1200. Visit the Tiwanaku archaeological site, which is about 2 hours from La Paz, and you’ll see proof of some of the amazing feats of this pre-Columbian culture. The stone-carved Sun Gate could gauge the position of the sun. The technologically advanced irrigation system transformed this barren terrain into viable farmland. The enormous and intricately designed stone-carved monoliths found here give testament to the amazing artistic talents of these people. Much here still remains a mystery, but when you walk around the site, it’s exciting to imagine what life must have been like here for the Tiwanaku. See “La Paz” in chapter 5.
- **Brasília**, Brazil: Built from scratch in a matter of years on the red soil of the dry cerrado, Brasília is an oasis of modernism in Brazil’s interior. Marvel at the clean lines and functional forms and admire some of the best modern architecture in the world. See “Brasília” in chapter 6.
- **Pelourinho**, Brazil: The restored historical center of Salvador is a treasure trove of baroque churches, colorful colonial architecture, steep cobblestone streets, and large squares. See “Salvador” in chapter 6.
- **San Pedro de Atacama, Chiu Chiu, and Caspana**, Chile: The driest desert in the world has one perk: Everything deteriorates very, very slowly. This is good news for travelers in search of the architectural roots of Chile, where villages such as San Pedro, Chiu Chiu, and Caspana boast equally impressive examples of 17th-century colonial adobe buildings and the sun-baked ruins of the Atacama Indian culture; some sites date from 800 B.C. Highlights undoubtedly are the enchanting, crumbling San Francisco Church of Chiu Chiu and the labyrinthine streets of the indigenous fort Pukará de Lasana. See “The Desert North” in chapter 7.
- **Chiloé Island**, Chile: Chiloé’s historical appeal is in large part derived from the fact that many citizens live much as they did 200 years ago, tilling fields with an ox and a plow, plying the coves with rickety wooden fishing skiffs, and hand-knitting sweaters to keep out the cold. Chiloé is home to a rare display of antique ecclesiastical architecture in the form of

hundreds of 17th- and 18th-century wooden churches, two dozen of which were recently named a World Patrimony by UNESCO. See “Chiloé” in chapter 7.

- **Quito's Old Town**, Ecuador: When you walk around old Quito, you will feel as if you have stepped back in time. The oldest church here dates from 1535, and it's still magnificent. La Compañía de Jesús only dates from 1765, but it is one of the most impressive baroque structures in all of South America. It's rare to find a city with so many charming colonial-style buildings. When you wander through the streets, it really seems as if you are walking through an outdoor museum. See “Quito” in chapter 8.
- **The Nasca Lines**, Peru: One of South America's great enigmas are the ancient, baffling lines etched into the desert sands along Peru's southern coast. There are trapezoids and triangles, identifiable shapes of animal and plant figures, and more than 10,000 lines that can only really be seen from the air. Various thought to be signs from the gods, agricultural and astronomical calendars, or even extraterrestrial airstrips, the Nasca Lines were constructed between 300 B.C. and A.D. 700. See “Lima” in chapter 9.
- **Cusco**, Peru: Cusco is a living museum of Peruvian history, with Spanish colonial churches and mansions sitting atop perfectly constructed Inca walls of exquisitely carved granite blocks that fit together without mortar. In the hills above the city lie more terrific examples of Inca masonry: the zig-zagged defensive walls of Sacsayhuamán and the smaller ruins of Q'enko, Puca Pucara, and Tambomachay. See “Cusco” in chapter 9.
- **Colonia del Sacramento**, Uruguay: An easy day trip from either Buenos Aires or Montevideo, Colonia del Sacramento is a World Heritage City with the best preserved colonial artistry in the region dating from the 17th century. See “A Side Trip to Colonia del Sacramento” in chapter 10.
- **Iglesia de San Francisco**, Caracas: This is the church where Simón Bolívar was proclaimed El Libertador in 1813, and the site of his massive funeral in 1842—the year his remains were brought back from Colombia, some 12 years after his death. Begun in 1575, the church shows the architectural influences of various periods and styles, but retains much of its colonial-era charm. See p. 705.

5 The Best Museums

- **Caminito**, Buenos Aires: At the center of La Boca lies the Caminito, a short pedestrian walkway that is both an outdoor museum and marketplace. Each day, tango performers dance alongside musicians, street vendors, and artists. Surrounding the street are shabby metal houses painted in dynamic shades of red, yellow, blue, and green, thanks to designer Benito Quinquela Martín. See p. 95.
- **Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes**, Buenos Aires: This museum contains the world's largest collection of Argentine sculptures and paintings from the 19th and 20th centuries. It also houses European art dating from the pre-Renaissance

The Best of Sensuous South America

Your trip will not be complete until you indulge in at least one of the following uniquely South American experiences:

- **Dance the tango in Argentina:** Top Al Pacino and Gabrielle Anwar in *Scent of a Woman* with the creation of your own tango dance, preferably in one of the seedier tango salons of Buenos Aires where it all started. See "Tango: Lessons in the Dance of Seduction & Despair" on p. 118.
- **Get high in Bolivia:** With the world's highest capital city, highest commercial airport, and highest navigable lake, Bolivia's air is so thin, it will make your head spin. But Bolivia is also home to the infamous coca leaf, a perfectly legal, extremely nutritious source of energy and an antidote to altitude sickness. To learn the complete history of the coca leaf (and for free samples), stop in at the **Coca Museum** in La Paz. See p. 183.
- **Be the girl (or boy) from Ipanema:** Rio may have other beaches but Ipanema is still the one with the best people-watching. Grab a spot, and food, drink, and eye-candy will come to you. See "Rio de Janeiro" in chapter 6.
- **Feel the beat in Brazil:** At night the historic heart of Salvador comes alive with music. Most impressive of all are the Afro blocos, the all-percussion bands that create such an intense rhythm with their drums that it sends shivers down your spine. See "Salvador" in chapter 6.
- **Soak in Chilean hot springs:** The volatile Andes not only builds volcanoes; it also produces steaming mineralized water that spouts from fissures, many of which have been developed into hot springs, from rock pools to full-scale luxury resorts. Most hot springs seem to have

period to the present day. The collections include notable pieces by Manet, Goya, El Greco, and Gauguin. See p. 100.

- **Malba-Colección Constantini,** Buenos Aires: This stunning new private museum houses one of the most impressive collections of Latin American art anywhere. Temporary and permanent exhibitions showcase names like Antonio Berni, Pedro Figari, Frida Kahlo, Candido Portinari, Diego Rivera, and Antonio Siguí. Many of the works confront social issues and explore questions of national identity. See p. 99.

- **Casa Nacional de la Moneda,** Potosí: Silver was discovered in Potosí in the 16th century. During the next few hundred years, Potosí would become one of the most important cities in the Spanish empire. The exhibits at this museum, which was originally a mint, do an excellent job of explaining both the history of Potosí and the process of turning raw silver into money. See p. 214.
- **Museu de Arte Sacra,** Salvador: When you walk into this small but splendid museum, what you hear is not the usual gloomy silence but the soft sweet sound of

been magically paired by nature with outdoor adventure spots, making for a thankful way to end a day of activity. The Lake District is a noted “hot spot,” especially around Pucón. See “The Chilean Lake District” in chapter 7.

- **Moisturize naturally in Ecuador:** In the cooler months, a light mist, known as the *garúa*, falls over the highlands of Santa Cruz Island in the Galápagos. Walking around the spectacular grounds at the **Royal Palm Hotel** (☎ 800/528-6069 in the U.S., or 05/5527-409), nestled on 200 lush hectares (500 acres), your face will be gently sprayed with a sweet, tropical mist that is cool, soothing, and the purest moisturizer Mother Nature can offer. See p. 557.
- **Stand beneath the condor's wings in Peru:** Colca Canyon is the best place in South America to see giant Andean condors, majestic birds with wingspans of up to 3.5m (12 ft.). From a stunning lookout point nearly 1,200m (4,000 ft.) above the canyon river, you can watch as the condors appear, slowly circle, and gradually gain altitude with each pass, until they soar silently above your head and head off down the river. A truly spine-tingling spectacle, the flight of the big birds may make you feel quite small. See “Arequipa” in chapter 9.
- **Stroke a 3.6m (12-ft.) anaconda in Venezuela:** There's no guarantee you'll wrangle an anaconda—many lodges frown on direct contact—but you can get awfully close. Try a stay at **Hato El Cedral** (☎ 0212/781-8995; www.hatocedral.com); sightings of the large anaconda here are common, particularly in the dry season. If you're lucky, you'll see a “mating ball,” several males and one female entwined in a writhing ball of anaconda lust. See p. 743.

Handel. It's a small indication of the care curators have taken in assembling and displaying one of Brazil's best collections of Catholic art—reliquaries, processional crosses, and crucifixes of astonishing refinement. The artifacts are shown in a former monastery, a simple, beautiful building that itself counts as a work of art. See p. 296.

- **Museu de Arte Moderna, Rio de Janeiro:** It's impossible to miss the MAM. It's a long, large, rectangular building lofted off the ground by an arcade of concrete struts, giving the structure the appearance of an airplane wing. Inside

are walls of solid plate glass that welcome in both city and sea. Displays present the best of contemporary art from Brazil and Latin America. See p. 256.

- **Museo Arqueológico Padre Le Paige, San Pedro de Atacama:** This little museum will come as an unexpected surprise for its wealth of indigenous artifacts, such as “Miss Chile,” a leathered mummy whose skin, teeth, and hair are mostly intact, as well as a display of skulls that show the creepy ancient custom of cranial deformation practiced by the elite as a status symbol. The Atacama Desert is the driest in the world,

and this climate has produced some of the best-preserved artifacts in Latin America, on view here. See p. 437.

- **Fundación Guayasamín**, Quito: Quito is most famous for being a city of historical wonders. But this modern art museum proves that the city is also moving forward. Oswaldo Guayasamín is one of Ecuador's best-known modern artists, and this museum has an impressive collection of his often-chaotic work. He used his art to express his hatred for the totalitarian regimes of many Latin American countries in the 1970s. His work is extremely moving and powerful. See p. 505.
- **Museo de la Nación**, Lima: Lima is the museum capital of Peru, and the National Museum traces the art and history of the earliest inhabitants to the Inca Empire, the last before colonization by the Spaniards. In well-organized, chronological exhibits, it covers the country's unique architecture (including scale models of most major ruins in Peru) as well as ceramics and textiles. See p. 583.
- **Monasterio de Santa Catalina** and **Museo Santuarios Andinos**, Arequipa: The Convent of Santa

Catalina, founded in 1579, is the greatest religious monument in Peru. More than a convent, it's an extraordinary and evocative small village, with Spanish-style cobblestone streets, passageways, plazas, and cloisters, where more than 200 sequestered nuns once lived (only a handful remain). Down the street at the Museo Santuarios Andinos is a singular exhibit: Juanita, the Ice Maiden of Ampato. A 13- or 14-year-old girl sacrificed in the 1500s by Inca priests high on a volcano at more than 6,000m (20,000 ft.), "Juanita" was discovered in almost perfect condition in 1995. See p. 648 and p. 649.

- **Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Sofía Imber**, Caracas: Occupying 13 rooms spread out through the labyrinthine architecture of Caracas's Parque Central, the permanent collection here features a small but high-quality collection of singular works by such modern masters as Picasso, Red Grooms, Henry Moore, Joan Miró, and Francis Bacon, as well as a good representation of the conceptual works of Venezuelan star Jesús Soto. See p. 706.

6 The Best Festivals & Celebrations

- **Carnaval**, Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay: The week before the start of Lent, Mardi Gras is celebrated in many towns in Argentina, although to a much lesser extent than in neighboring Brazil. In addition to Rio's incredible party, Salvador puts the accent on participation: The action is out on the streets with the *blocos*, flatbed trucks with bands and sound systems leading people on a 3-day dance through the streets. Carnaval is celebrated throughout Uruguay with

a passion topped only by Brazil. Montevideo spares no neighborhood parades, dance parties, and intense Latin merrymaking. See chapters 4, 6, and 10.

- **Festival of the Virgen de la Candelaria**, Bolivia and Peru: The Virgen de la Candelaria is one of the most beloved religious icons in Bolivia. On February 2, parades and parties erupt in Copacabana in her honor. The festivities, which are some of the liveliest in Bolivia, combine a mixture of Catholic and ancient local

influences. Puno, perhaps the epicenter of Peruvian folklore, imbues its festivals with a unique vibrancy; their celebration of the Virgin is one of the greatest folk religious festivals in South America, with a 2-week explosion of music and dance, and some of the most fantastic costumes and masks seen anywhere. See “Lake Titicaca” in chapter 5 and “Puno & Lake Titicaca” in chapter 9.

- **A soccer game at Maracanã stadium**, Brazil: Nothing can prepare you for a game at the largest stadium in the world. Up to 100,000 fans sing, dance, and drum for hours in one of the biggest parties in town. See “Rio de Janeiro” in chapter 6.
- **New Year’s Eve**, Brazil and Chile: Join up to a million revelers on Copacabana Beach for one the largest celebrations in Brazil; fireworks, concerts, and the religious ceremonies of the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé make for an unforgettable New Year’s Eve. In Chile, Valparaíso rings in the new year with a spectacular bang, setting off a fireworks display high above the city’s shimmering bay for the throngs of visitors who blanket the hills. Pablo Neruda used to spend New Year’s here, watching the exploding sky from his home high on a cliff. The yearly event is absolutely hectic, so come early and plan on staying late. See “Rio de Janeiro” in chapter 6 and “Around Santiago & the Central Valley” in chapter 7.
- **Dieciocho**, Chile: Chile’s Independence Day (Sept 18), followed

by Armed Force’s Day (Sept 19), constitute 2 days of hearty celebration. The hub of the Dieciocho celebration is the *fonda*, a circus-like tent surrounded by tiny stands selling empanadas, *chicha* (fermented apple juice), and other typical treats popular during this holiday. Inside the *fonda*, live bands play music for revelers to dance the *cueca*, the Chilean national dance. Nearly all drivers, it seems, decorate their cars with flags, and in the main plaza of every town, citizens string flags across streets. See “Planning Your Trip to Chile” in chapter 7.

- **Inti Raymi**, Ecuador and Peru: June 24 to 29, the fiestas of San Pablo, San Juan, and Inti Raymi (a sun festival celebrating the summer solstice) all merge into one big holiday in the Otavalo area. For the whole week, local people celebrate with big barbecues, parades, traditional dances, and bonfires. In Peru, it takes over Cusco and transforms the Sacsayhuamán ruins overlooking the city into a majestic stage. See “Otavalo & Imbabura Province” in chapter 8 and “Cusco” in chapter 9.
- **Caracas International Theater Festival**, Venezuela: Each year, this festival brings together scores of companies from around the world and across Venezuela for a 2-week celebration of the theater arts. Performances are held in a variety of theaters around Caracas, as well as in the streets and plazas. This is the premiere theater festival in Latin America. See “Caracas” in chapter 11.

7 The Best Hotels

- **Alvear Palace Hotel**, Buenos Aires (☎ 0800/44-HOTEL local toll-free, or 011/4808-2100): Decorated in Empire- and Louis XV-style furnishings, this is the

most exclusive hotel in Buenos Aires. Luxurious guest rooms and suites have chandelier lighting, feather beds, silk drapes, and beautiful marble bathrooms;

service is sharp and professional. See p. 105.

- **Los Notros**, Perito Moreno Glacier, near Calafate (☎ 011/4814-3934): Location—in this case, the view spanning one of Argentina's great wonders, the Perito Moreno Glacier—is everything at Los Notros hotel. Impeccable rooms come with dramatic views of the electric-blue tongue of the glacier, making this lodge one of the most upscale, unique hotels in Argentina. See p. 158.
- **El Hostal de su Merced**, Sucre (☎ 0104/6442-706): Sucre is one of the most historic cities in Bolivia, so it makes sense to stay in a historic hotel. El Hostal de su Merced is housed in an elegant 300-year-old mansion. All the rooms have charming antiques, crystal chandeliers, and lace curtains. See p. 210.
- **Copacabana Palace**, Rio de Janeiro (☎ 0800/211-533): Fred and Ginger didn't dance just anywhere when they went "flying down to Rio." The Copacabana Palace is Brazil's most famous hotel, standing beautiful on the country's most famous beach. See p. 273.
- **Hotel Tropical de Manaus** (☎ 0800/150-006): The Tropical Hotel in Manaus is without a doubt the hotel in town. Set in its own piece of rainforest on the banks of the Rio Negro, the hotel is built in an elegant colonial style. Rooms are spacious and the amenities are top-notch; archery lessons, a zoo, wakeboard lessons, a wave pool, a salon, and more await you in the middle of the Amazon. See p. 365.
- **Hotel Explora**, San Pedro de Atacama and Torres del Paine (☎ 2/206-6060 in Santiago): Few hotels have generated as much press in Latin America as the two all-inclusive Explora lodges in San Pedro de Atacama and Torres del Paine. A dynamite location has helped, of course, but great service, cozy rooms with out-of-this-world views, interiors that are equally elegant and comfortable, and guided outdoor trekking, horseback-riding, and biking excursions are what really put these hotels above par. The lodges were designed by several of Chile's top architects, built of native materials, and decorated with local art. All-inclusive packages are pricey, but you won't need to spend anything once you're there. See p. 439 and p. 478.
- **Hotel Antumalal**, Pucón (☎ 45/441011): This low-slung, Bauhaus-influenced country inn is one of the most special places to lodge in Chile. Located high above the shore of Lake Villarrica and a sloping, terraced garden, the hotel literally sinks into its surroundings, offering a cozy ambience and number-one view of the evening sunset. A warm welcome and a room with no lock are all part of making you feel at home, and the chic, retro decor is a welcome relief from the cookie-cutter style of many hotels. See p. 445.
- **La Mirage Garden Hotel & Spa**, Otavalo (☎ 800/327-3573 in the U.S., or 06/915-237): This luxurious hotel is one of Ecuador's finest. The manicured gardens make this place feel like a mini-Versailles, while the rooms are all palatial-style suites. Ancient Ecuadorian treatments are the specialty at the spa. See p. 525.
- **Royal Palm Hotel**, Santa Cruz, Galápagos (☎ 800/528-6069 in the U.S., or 05/5527-409): This is the most luxurious resort in all of Ecuador and its restaurant is

arguably one of the finest in the country. The villas are truly sumptuous, each with a private Jacuzzi and an enormous bathroom with hardwood floors. Large windows open up to the lush tropical landscape and the awesome stretch of the Pacific in the distance. See p. 557.

- **Hotel Antigua Miraflores**, Lima (☎ 01/241-6116): This charming midsize hotel, occupying a gracious century-old mansion, is full of Peruvian touches. The house is tastefully decorated, lined with colonial Peruvian art, but laid-back, built around a leafy courtyard. It's a peaceful respite within the hubbub of Miraflores and the rest of Lima. See p. 586.
- **Hotel Monasterio**, Cusco (☎ 084/241-777): Carved out of a 16th-century monastery, itself built over the foundations of an Inca palace, this Orient Express hotel is the most dignified and historic place to stay in Peru. With its own gilded chapel and 18th-century Cusco School art collection, it's an attraction in its own right. Rooms are gracefully decorated with colonial touches, particularly the rooms off the serene first courtyard. See p. 608.

- **Belmont House**, Montevideo (☎ 2/600-0430): A boutique hotel in Montevideo's peaceful Carrasco neighborhood, Belmont House offers its privileged guests intimacy and luxury close to the city and the beach. Small elegant spaces with carefully chosen antiques and wood furnishings give this the feeling of a private estate. See p. 677.

- **Conrad Resort & Casino**, Punta del Este (☎ 42/491-111): This resort dominates social life in Punta del Este. Luxurious rooms have terraces overlooking the two main beaches, and there's a wealth of outdoor activities from tennis and golf to horseback riding and watersports. See p. 684.

- **Jungle Rudy Campamento**, Canaima (☎/fax 0286/962-2359 in Canaima, or 0212/693-0618 in Caracas; www.junglerudy.com): The accommodations here are decidedly rustic—no television, air-conditioning, or telephones. However, the setting, on the banks of the Río Carrao above Ucaima Falls, is spectacular. If you can land no. 9, you'll be able to say you stayed in the same room as Prince Charles. See p. 749.

8 The Best Local Dining Experiences

- **Grilled meat in Argentina:** Widely considered the best *parilla* (grill restaurant) in Buenos Aires, **Cabaña las Lilas** (☎ 011/4313-1336) is always packed. The menu pays homage to Argentine beef cuts, which come exclusively from the restaurant's private *estancia* (ranch). The steaks are outstanding. See p. 110.
- **Salteñas in Bolivia:** In almost every town in Bolivia, the locals eat *salteñas* for breakfast. These delicious treats are made with

either chicken or beef, spiced with onions and raisins, and all wrapped up in a doughy pastry shell. Most people buy them from vendors on the street. See "Bolivian Breakfast" on p. 192.

- **Street food in Brazil:** Whether you want prawns, chicken, tapioca pancakes, coconut sweets, or corn on the cob, it can all be purchased on the street for next to nothing. Indulge—don't be afraid to try some of the best snacks that Brazil has to offer. See chapter 6.

- **Prawns on Ilhabela:** Ilhabela has the most succulent, sweet, and juicy prawns in all of Brazil. Enjoy them grilled, sautéed, or stuffed with cheese—they're as good as they come. See "São Paulo" in chapter 6.
- **Fish in the Pantanal:** Anywhere in the Pantanal you can try the phenomenal bounty of the world's largest floodplain. Paçu, dourado, and pintado are just a few of the region's best catches. See "The Pantanal" in chapter 6.
- **The Mercado Central in Santiago:** The chaotic, colorful central fish-and-produce market of Santiago should not be missed by anyone, even if you are not particularly fond of seafood. But if you are, you'll want to relish one of the flavorful concoctions served at one of the market's simple restaurants. Hawklike waitresses guard the market's passageways awaiting hungry diners and shouting "Hey, lady! Hey, sir! Eat here!"—but **Donde Augusto** is a good bet. See p. 400.
- **Fresh fruit drinks in Ecuador:** The tropical coastal climate in Ecuador is perfect for growing fruit. Almost every restaurant offers a wonderful selection of fresh local fruit, including pineapple, orange, passion fruit, coconut, blackberry, banana, and a variety of typical Ecuadorian fruits such as *guarnaba* and *naranjilla*, which don't even have English names. It's common to serve fruit in the form of a drink. See chapter 8.
- **Ceviche in Peru:** Peruvian cuisine is one of the most distinguished in the Americas. Though cooking varies greatly from Andean to coastal and Amazonian climes, there are few things more satisfying than a classic Peruvian ceviche: raw fish and shellfish marinated in lime or lemon juice and hot chile peppers, served with raw onion, sweet potato, and roasted corn. It's wonderfully refreshing and spicy. The perfect accompaniment is either *chicha morada*, a refreshment made from blue corn, or a pisco sour, a frothy cocktail of white grape brandy, egg whites, lemon juice, sugar, and bitters—akin to a margarita. See chapter 9.
- **Ice cream in Mérida: Heladería Coromoto** holds the Guinness world record for the most ice cream flavors. Be adventurous and sample a scoop of smoked trout, garlic, beer, avocado, or squid ice cream. The count currently exceeds 700 flavors, with roughly 100 choices available on any night. See p. 740.

9 The Best Markets

- **San Telmo antiques market,** Buenos Aires: The Sunday market is as much a cultural event as a commercial event, as old-time tango and *milonga* dancers take to the streets with other performers. Here you will glimpse Buenos Aires much as it was at the beginning of the 20th century. See p. 95.
- **The Witch Doctors' Market,** La Paz: This is one of the most unusual markets in South America. The stalls are filled with llama fetuses and all sorts of good-luck charms. Locals come here to buy magic potions or small trinkets that will bring them wealth, health, or perhaps a good harvest. You'll be sure to find unique gifts here for all your friends at home. See p. 187.

- **Mercado Adolpho Lisboa**, Manaus: This is a beautiful iron-and-glass copy of Paris's now demolished market hall in Les Halles. It's a great place to see fruits and fish fresh from the Amazon, but it's not for the squeamish. Vendors cut and clean the fish on the spot; some of the chopped-in-half catfish still wriggle. A short walk downstream, you can watch Amazon riverboats load up on supplies at the Feira do Produtor. See p. 363.
- **Ver-o-Peso Market**, Belém: This 1899 market hall is a vast water-side cornucopia, with just about every product grown or made in the Amazon available for purchase. Stroll into the blue Gothic building and you're in an Amazon Fish World, with dozens of outrageously strange Amazon fish laid out before you on ice. Outside under the canopies there are hundreds of species of Amazon fruits. The love-starved and sexually bereft can seek out the traditional medicine kiosks, where every potion and bark-derived infusion seems to heighten allure, potency, and fertility.
- **Mercado Central**, Santiago: It would be a crime to visit Chile and not sample the rich variety of fish and shellfish available here, and this vibrant market is the best place to experience the country's love affair with its fruits of the sea. Nearly every edible (and seemingly inedible) creature is for sale, from sea urchins to the alien-looking and unfamiliar piure, among colorful bushels of fresh vegetables and some of the most aggressive salesmen this side of the Andes. See p. 400.
- **Feria Artesanal de Angelmó**, Puerto Montt: Stretching along several blocks of the Angelmó port area of Puerto Montt are rows and rows of stalls stocked with arts and crafts, clothing, and novelty items from the entire surrounding region, even Chiloé. This market is set up to buy, buy, buy! and it imparts little local color, but chances are you'll find yourself here before Temuco, which is more off the beaten path. Be sure to bargain for everything. See p. 462.
- **Otavaló**, Ecuador: Otavaló is probably one of the most famous markets in South America for good reason: You won't find run-of-the-mill tourist trinkets here. The local people are well known for their masterful craftsmanship—you can buy alpaca scarves, hand-woven bags, and a variety of other exquisite handmade goods. See "Otavaló & Imbabura Province" in chapter 8.
- **Pisac**, Peru: Thousands of tourists descend each Sunday morning on Pisac's liveliest handicrafts market, which takes over the central plaza and spills across adjoining streets. Many sellers, decked out in the dress typical of their villages, come from remote populations high in the mountains. Village officials lead processions around the square after Mass. Pisac is one of the best spots for colorful Andean textiles, including rugs, alpaca sweaters, and ponchos. See "The Sacred Valley of the Incas" in chapter 9.
- **Mercado del Puerto**, Montevideo: The Mercado del Puerto (Port Market) takes place afternoons and weekends, letting you sample the flavors of Uruguay, from small empanadas to enormous barbecued meats. Saturday is the best day to visit, when cultural activities accompany the market. See p. 677.

- **Hannsi Centro Artesanal**, El Hatillo (☎ 0212/963-7184; www.hannsi.com.ve): This huge indoor bazaar has everything from indigenous masks to ceramic wares to woven baskets. The selection is broad and covers everything from

trinkets to pieces of the finest craftsmanship. Most of the major indigenous groups of Venezuela are represented, including the Yanomami, Guajiro, Warao, Pemón, and Piaroa. See p. 708.

10 The Best of South America Online

- **<http://lanic.utexas.edu>**: The University of Texas Latin American Studies Department's database features an extensive list of useful links for every country in South America.
- **www.southamericadaily.com**: This is a good daily news site, with good links.
- **www.turismo.gov.ar**: This attractive site is best for official visitor information about the country, with maps and tips about places off the beaten track.
- **www.andesweb.com**: This great website offers complete information about skiing and snowboarding in Argentina and Chile. You can find full descriptions of resorts and related information such as weather conditions, ski rental, and general travel information.
- **www.boliviabiz.com**: Log on to this site for information about Bolivia's best hotels, tour operators, and museums.
- **www.brazil.org.uk**: Log on for information on Brazil's history, government, environment, and tourism, plus lots of links.
- **www.chile.com**: Chile's largest and most comprehensive website, featuring everything from regional and travel information, hotel and car rentals to a guide to investment. The majority is in Spanish; however, the English section has very complete information.
- **www.chilevinos.com**: Every aspect of the Chilean wine industry is covered at this website, such as winemaker and winery profiles, grape-growing updates, a glossary, a chat room, and online ordering. The only thing this site doesn't have is an English edition. If you can't get through the lingo, head to www.winesofchile.com.
- **www.ecuadorexplorer.com**: Great source of information about all things Ecuadorian.
- **www.peru.org.pe**: The recently revamped PromPerú website has detailed sections on Peruvian history, festivals, trip planning, and outdoor "adrenaline rushes," as well as a stock of photo and video images and audio files. Also check out **<http://gci275.com/peru>** ("Peruvian Graffiti"), a website by an American journalist and former resident of Peru. It's an engaging compendium of Peruvian history, politics, media, and culture, as well as the latest news, from a very personal perspective. It's an interesting place to start to get a handle on a complicated nation.
- **www.turismo.gub.uy**: The Uruguayan Ministry of Tourism's website is chock full of information about the country, including promotional specials for travelers and links to local media.