

# The Best of South America

Whether you're an archaeology buff, an outdoor adventurer, or a partier 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 (where it is spelled Iguacu) sides. In addition to the falls, Iguazú encompasses a marvelous subtropical jungle with extensive flora and fauna. See "Puerto Iguazú & Iguazú Falls" in chapter 4 and "Foz do Iguacu" in chapter 6.
- **Traveling the Wine Roads of Mendoza:** Mendoza offers traditional and modernist wineries, set among vines that run into the snowcapped Andes. The wineries are free to visitors and easily accessible along leafy thoroughfares known as *los Caminos del Vino*. Over 100 wineries offer tours, but most are by appointment only. See "Mendoza" in chapter 4.
- **Traversing the Salar de Uyuni by Land Cruiser:** The world's largest salt desert and its surroundings in southwest Bolivia are one of the most unusual and fascinating places on planet earth: islands of cacti, red flamingo-filled lagoons, steaming geysers, herds of vicuñas, and hotels made of salt. See "Salar de Uyuni" in chapter 5.
- **Celebrating Carnaval 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. Part of the fascination here is viewing the antique Victorian mansions and colorful tin houses that line terraced walkways winding around precipitous hills; yet also as worthwhile is spending the night here in one of the city's new boutique hotels and savoring the local cuisine at one of Valparaíso's

gourmet restaurants. As well, 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 Fjords of Southern Chile:** Quietly sailing through the lush beauty of Chile's southern fjords 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 fjords 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 sea lion colonies, stopping at the end of the world at Cape Horn. See "The Chilean Lake District" in chapter 7.
- **Visiting Colombia's Paradise on Earth:** The Eje Cafetero, with its plantain- and coffee-terraced slopes, verdant mountains, and quaint Spanish-style colonial farm houses, remains one of the most traditional parts of the country. (Remember: Red pillars and shutters for Liberals, blue for Conservatives.) The lush vegetation, wild orchids, and perfect weather will make you think you're in some kind of earthly paradise. Here, you can lie back in a hammock and listen to the birds chirp, visit the hot springs of nearby Santa Rosa, or horseback ride through the endless coffee plantations—a world removed from the hectic Colombian cities. See "El Eje Cafetero" in chapter 8.
- **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 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 9.

- **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 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 (11,800 ft.) above sea level, and the star-littered night sky alone are worth the trip. Even better, for those with a bit of adventure and extra time, are kayaking on Titicaca and spending the night on private Isla Suasi. See "Puno & Lake Titicaca" in chapter 11.
- **Gazing upon Machu Picchu:** However you get to it—whether you hike the fabled Inca Trail or hop aboard one of the prettiest train rides in South America—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. If you've already been to Machu Picchu, try trekking to one of the "new" lost Inca cities, such as Choquequirao. See "The Sacred Valley of the Incas" in chapter 11.

- **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 12.
- **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 Río Caura" in chapter 13.

- **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 13.

## 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.
- **Cafayate Wine Town, Argentina:** This small, sandy village in the Argentine Northwest is surrounded by multicolored mountain ranges and red rock desert. Vineyards punctuated by tall cactus sentinels stretch into the foothills. Home to the delicious white wine Torrontes,

Cafayate offers beautiful luxury wine lodges or more down-to-earth family-run hotels. See "Salta & the Northwest" in chapter 4.

- **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 laid-back 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 is home to some of the most inspired eco-lodges in South America. 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.
- **Villa de Leyva**, Colombia: You’d be hard-pressed to find a place more picturesque than Villa de Leyva, one of the earliest towns founded by the Spanish. At 500 years old, Villa de Leyva is nearly unspoiled by the ravishes of time. Offering green and white colonial-style churches, cobblestone plazas, delightful bed-and-breakfasts, a thriving arts community, and pristine countryside, it’s no wonder Villa de Leyva has become the weekend getaway of choice for upscale Bogotáños. Villa de Leyva makes a great base for exploring the spectacular Boyacá countryside and participating in all sorts of adventure sports and eco-opportunities, from repelling and kayaking to nature walks through the nearby desert and waterfalls. See “A Side Trip from Bogotá: Villa de Leyva” in chapter 8.
- **Otavaló**, Ecuador: This small indigenous town is famous for its artisans market. However, it also serves as a fabulous base for a wide range of adventures, activities, and side trips. Nearby attractions include Cuicocha Lake, Peguche Waterfall, Mojanda Lakes, and Condor Park. See “Otavaló & Imbabura Province” in chapter 9.
- **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 snowcapped 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 11.
- **Colca Valley Villages**, Peru: Chivay, on the edge of Colca Canyon, is the valley’s main town, but it isn’t much more than a laid-back market town with fantastic hot springs on its outskirts. Doting the Colca Valley and its extraordinary agricultural terracing are 14 charming colonial villages dating to the 16th century, each marked by its handsomely decorated church. Yanque, Coporaque, Maca, and Lari are among the most attractive towns. Natives in the valley

are descendants of the pre-Inca ethnic communities Collaguas and Cabanas, and they maintain the vibrant style of traditional dress, highlighted by fantastically embroidered and sequined hats. See chapter 11.

- **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 12.

- **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 13.

---

### 3 THE BEST OUTDOOR ADVENTURES

---

- **Discovering Iguazú Falls by Raft:** This is a place where birds like the great dusky swift and the 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 64km (40-mile) road that descends nearly 1,800m (5,900 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 flood plain 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 (2,600 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 (200 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 “Southern 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 9.

- **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 43km (27-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. Hikers averse to crowds can also embark on one of the newer alternative treks in

Cusco’s Andes, such as Salcantay or Ausangate. See “The Sacred Valley of the Incas” in chapter 11.

- **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 National Reserve** 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. Eco-travelers 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 11.
- **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. **Ecobuzos** (☎ 0295/262-9811; [www.ecobuzos.com](http://www.ecobuzos.com)) is the best dive operator on the archipelago. See “Los Roques National Park” in chapter 13.
- **One-Stop Adventure Travel from Mérida, Venezuela:** With a half-dozen or so peaks 4,500m (14,760 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 of weeks to do it all, but both **Arassari Treks** ([www.arassari.com](http://www.arassari.com)) and **Natoura**

**Adventure Tours** ([www.natoura.com](http://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 13.

## 4 THE MOST INTRIGUING HISTORICAL SITES

- **Manzana de las Luces**, Buenos Aires, Argentina: 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. It’s worth a visit to see the beautiful altar. See p. 93.
- **Teatro Colón**, Buenos Aires, Argentina: 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. 96.
- **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.
- **Potosí**, Bolivia: Once one of the richest cities in the world and now one of the poorest, Potosí is a fascinating but tragic place. A silver mining town that once bankrolled the Spanish empire, Potosí is a high-altitude relic featuring beautiful church architecture and primitive mining, both of which you can experience firsthand. See “A Side Trip to Potosí” 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.

- **Cartagena**, Colombia: Declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1984, the old walled city of Cartagena is the greatest living outdoor museum dedicated to Spanish colonial history. A walk through one of Cartagena's narrow cobblestone streets, complete with centuries-old Spanish mansions, flower-strewn balconies, and horse-drawn carriages showing tourists around town, might make you feel as if you've stepped onto the set of a colonial-era *telenovela*. Best of all, the finest attractions—the plazas, the fortress, and most of the churches—are free. See “Cartagena & the Atlantic Coast” in chapter 8.
- **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 9.
- **The Nazca 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 Nazca Lines were constructed between 300 B.C. and A.D. 700. See “Lima” in chapter 11.
- **Cusco**, Peru: Cusco, the ancient Inca capital, 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 zigzagged defensive walls of Sacsayhuamán and the smaller ruins of Q'enko, Puca Pucara, and Tambomachay. See “Cusco” in chapter 11.
- **Iglesia de San Francisco**, Caracas, Venezuela: 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. 769.

## 5 THE BEST MUSEUMS

- **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 period to the present day. The collections include notable pieces by Manet, Goya, El Greco, and Gauguin. See p. 95.
- **MALBA—Colección Costantini**, Buenos Aires: This stunning new private museum houses one of the most impressive collections of Latin American art anywhere. Temporary and permanent exhibitions showcase such names as Antonio Berni, Pedro Figari, Frida Kahlo, Candido Portinari, Diego Rivera, and Antonio Sígüí. Many of the works confront social issues and explore



questions of national identity. See p. 94.

- **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 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 counts itself as a work of art. See p. 308.
- **Pinacoteca do Estado**, São Paulo: A sunlit joy to be in, the Pinacoteca is one of the best curated art collections in Brazil. Renovated in 1997, the roof and many interior walls were removed, replaced with a latticework of glass and open spaces, and connected by a series of catwalks. It's the perfect place for anyone wanting to see and understand Brazilian art. See p. 289.
- **Museo Arqueológico Padre Le Paige**, San Pedro de Atacama: This little museum will come as an unexpected surprise for its wealth of indigenous artifacts, although the museum's famous mummies have been taken off display due to ethical questions. Still, considering that the Atacama Desert is the driest in the world, this climate has produced some of the best preserved artifacts in Latin America, on view here. See p. 416.
- **Museo del Oro**, Bogotá: With over 20,000 pieces of gold, the Museo del Oro offers the largest collection of its kind in the world, providing a visual history of Colombia and Latin America from the pre-Columbian era to the Spanish conquest. Taking a guided tour of the museum is one of the best ways to learn about the indigenous groups that inhabited modern-day Colombia before the arrival of the Spaniards. Whatever you do, don't leave Bogotá without visiting the gold room, a dazzling display of 8,000 pieces of gold. See p. 482.
- **Fundación Guayasamín**, Quito: Oswaldo Guayasamín was Ecuador's greatest and most famous modern artist. His striking large paintings, murals, and sculptures had an impact on artists across Latin America and around the world. This extensive museum displays both his own work and pieces from his collection. Combined with the neighboring **Capilla del Hombre**, this is a must-see for any art lover or Latin American history buff. See p. 540.
- **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. 641.
- **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-year-old girl sacrificed in the 1500s by Inca priests high on a volcano at 6,380m (20,926 ft.), Juanita was discovered in almost perfect condition in 1995. See p. 707.
- **Museo de Arte Contemporáneo**, Caracas: Occupying 13 rooms spread out through the labyrinthine architecture of

## 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:

- **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 **Museo de la Coca** in La Paz. See p. 191.
- **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 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.
- **Enjoy an Orgy of Sights, Sounds, and Smells in Ecuador:** The outdoor **artisans market in Otavalo** is an assault on your senses. The colors and textures of the intricate textiles mix with the sounds of musicians playing reed pipes, as you walk among the scents of herbs and flowers offered up for sale. See p. 558.
- **Feel the Wind 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 (11 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 11.
- **Stroke a roughly 4m (13-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** (p. 804); 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.

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. 769.

## 6 THE BEST FESTIVALS & CELEBRATIONS

- **Carnaval**, Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, 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 emphasis 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. Barranquilla, Colombia's fourth-largest city, boasts the world's second-largest Carnaval after Rio, and here you can enjoy many events such as the parade of floats, the crowning of Miss Carnaval, and African-inspired dances. 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, 8, and 12.
- **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 Virgen 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 11.
- **New Year's Eve**, Brazil and Chile: Join up to a million revelers on Copacabana Beach for one of 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.
- **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 entire 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 9 and "Cusco" in chapter 11.
- **Mendoza Wine Harvest Festival**: The first weekend of every March, Argentina's Malbec region celebrates the bumper harvest with wine, women,

and song. Parades, concerts, and a carnival-like atmosphere culminate in a grand open-air spectacle of music,

dance, and fireworks. See “Mendoza” in chapter 4.

## 7 THE BEST HOTELS

- **Alvear Palace Hotel**, Buenos Aires (☎ 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. 103.
- **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. 212.
- **Hotel Sofitel**, Rio de Janeiro (☎ 0800/241-232 or 021/2525-1232): Considered Rio’s best hotel, the Sofitel combines old-world elegance and style with one of the city’s best locations, across from the Copacabana Fort and steps from Ipanema. See p. 264.
- **Tropical Manaus** (☎ 0800/701-2670 or 092/3659-5000): The Tropical 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. 342.
- **Casa Higueras**, Valparaíso (☎ 32/249-7900): Housed in an eggshell-white, elegant 1940s mansion that descends four floors on a slope of Cerro Alegre in Valparaíso, this hotel boasts one of the most culturally and architecturally interesting views in Chile. It is one of the country’s leading boutique hotels, and the combination of luxury lodging, an infinity pool and spa, umbrella-dotted terrace with a restaurant serving fine food, and a handsome, masculine design really earn kudos among travelers seeking something unique. See p. 403.
- **Awasi**, San Pedro (☎ 888/880-3219 in the U.S., or 55/851460): The intimate and stylish Awasi offers chic accommodations, out-of-the-ordinary excursions around San Pedro de Atacama, a spa, and fabulous cuisine. With just eight suites, the hotel encourages guests to get to know each other, and so it is not ideal for travelers seeking absolute anonymity, but suites—which come with indoor and outdoor showers—are large enough to escape to your own private paradise. The hotel, built of adobe and decorated with local art, is centered around an oasis-style pool and outdoor dining area and bar. See p. 417.
- **Hotel de la Opera**, Bogotá (☎ 1/336-2066): A rarity among Bogotá’s mostly modern, though uninspiring, lodging options, this is a truly charming hotel. In the heart of La Candelaria, Bogotá’s historic center, the de la Opera is a stunning restoration of two formerly dilapidated mansions once belonging to influential families. Old-world elegance blends effortlessly with modern-day amenities to make this Italian-style hotel the place to stay in Bogotá. Be sure to book in advance. See p. 486.
- **The Sofitel Santa Clara**, Cartagena (☎ 5/664-6070): Conveniently located

within the walled-city neighborhood of San Diego, the Sofitel Santa Clara is housed in a 400-year-old building and boasts one of the city's best spas. The interior courtyards and tastefully decorated rooms give the hotel a decidedly romantic, exclusive feel. See p. 510.

- **La Mirage Garden Hotel & Spa**, Otavalo (☎ 800/327-3573 in the U.S. and Canada, or 06/2915-237; [www.mirage.com.ec](http://www.mirage.com.ec)): 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. 562.
- **Royal Palm Hotel**, Santa Cruz, Galápagos (☎ 05/2527-409; [www.royalpalmgalapagos.com](http://www.royalpalmgalapagos.com)): This luxurious resort almost seems out of place in the remote and rustic Galápagos. 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. 595.
- **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. 666.
- **Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel**, Aguas Calientes (☎ 800/442-5042 or 084/211-122 for reservations): It's not next to the ruins, but this rustic hotel is a compound of bungalows ensconced in lush tropical gardens and cloud forest, and it's the nicest place in Aguas Calientes. With lots of nature trails and guided activities, it's also great for naturalists. And after a day at Machu Picchu, the spring-fed pool is a great alternative to the thermal baths in town. Junior suites, with fireplaces and small terraces, are the most coveted rooms. See p. 689.
- **Belmont House**, Montevideo (☎ 2/600-0430): A 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. 736.
- **The Conrad Resort and Casino**, Punta del Este (☎ 042/491111): 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. 745.
- **Jungle Rudy Campamento**, Canaima (☎/fax 0286/962-2359 in Canaima, or 0212/754-0244 in Caracas; [www.junglerudy.com](http://www.junglerudy.com)): The accommodations here are decidedly simple—no television, air-conditioning, or telephones. However, the setting, on the banks of the Río Carrao above Ucaima Falls, is spectacular. See p. 809.

## 8 THE BEST LOCAL DINING EXPERIENCES

- **Grilled Meat in Argentina**: Widely considered the best *parrilla* (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. 107.

- **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 chapter 5's "Tips on Dining" on p. 184.
- **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 flood plain. *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. See p. 379.
- **Bandeja Paisa in Medellín:** This tasty Antioquian dish of soup, rice, beans, avocado, salad, sausage, plantain, shredded beef, eggs, *arepa*, and *chicharrón*

(pork rinds) will leave you stuffed for the rest of the day. See chapter 8.

- **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 *guanábana* and *naranjilla*. My favorite is the **tamarillo** (tree tomato), which is often served as a breakfast drink. See chapter 9.
- **Ceviche in Peru:** Peruvian cuisine is one of the most distinguished in the world. 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 chili peppers, served with raw onion, sweet potato, and toasted corn. It's wonderfully refreshing and spicy. (And if that's not adventurous enough for you, you can always try *cuy*, or guinea pig.) 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 11.
- **Ice Cream at Heladería Coromoto, Mérida (☎ 0274/252-3525):** This shop 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 900 flavors, with roughly 100 choices available on any night. See p. 800.

## 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. 90.

- **The Witches' 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. 194.
- **Mercado Adolpho Lisboa**, Manaus: The Mercado Adolpho Lisboa is a vast waterside cornucopia featuring outrageously strange Amazon fish, hundreds of species of Amazon fruits found nowhere else, traditional medicine love potions, and just about anything else produced in the Amazon, all of it cheap, cheap, cheap. See p. 341.
- **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. 379.
- **Angelmó Fish and Artisan Market**, 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. This market is set up to buy, buy, buy, and it imparts little local color; don't be afraid to bargain. The fish market next door is loud, colorful, and full of treasure, making it more appealing than the street-side stalls. See p. 440.
- **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, handwoven bags, and a variety of other exquisite handmade goods. See "Otavaló & Imbabura Province" in chapter 9.
- **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. Some travelers, though, prefer **Chinchero** (also in the Sacred Valley); it's slightly more authentic, the artisans (in village dress) themselves sell their goods, and the setting is dramatic. See "The Sacred Valley of the Incas" in chapter 11.
- **Mercado del Puerto**, Montevideo: The Mercado del Puerto (Port Market) takes place afternoons and weekends, letting you sample the flavors of Uruguay, from empanadas to barbecued meats. Saturday is the best day to visit, when cultural activities accompany the market. See p. 735.
- **Hannsi Centro Artesanal**, El Hatillo: 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. 772.