

All the best in Latin America

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

Why Latin America? That's a frequent question from friends who enjoy destinations such as Europe or Hawaii. For us, several decades of living and traveling throughout Latin America have convinced us that there is so much to see and do. And, of course, we have developed a list of our favorite places and experiences that we suggest to others.

- Most awesome sight-Iguazú Falls on the border of Brazil, Argentina and Paraguay. One cannot forget over 200 separate cascades roaring out of the forest into the gorge below. This spectacular wonder of the world is best viewed from the Brazilian side in the morning and Argentinean perspective in the afternoon. Yes, you need at least two days here to try to take it all in.
- Most beautiful city-Do we really have to tell you? Rio de Janeiro of course, with its wide expanse of beach, rolling surf, and green mountains rising up out of the sea. The view of the city from either Sugar Loaf or the Christ the Redeemer statue is unforgettable.
- Best colonial architecture-While the ancient Inca capital of Cuzco, Peru features Spanish colonial buildings, some of them constructed on top of Indian ruins, Quito, Ecuador is really the winner on this one. The Presidential palace and other buildings ringing the central Independence Plaza along with the San Francisco Cathedral are well preserved and, taken together, the most impressive display of Spanish architecture we have seen. Don't miss some of the nearby, lesser-known churches and monasteries, nor the Guápulo church some distance from the center part of town.
- Most friendly, hospitable people-While all Latin Americans show genuine warmth and friendship, for us it's a toss-up between Costa Rica, where people say hello on the street and welcome a visitor to their country and Brazil where the "thumbs-up" attitude makes one feel good about being there. We'll cheat on this one and give the friendly award to the Costa Ricans and the hospitality award to the Brazilians.
- Most gorgeous scenery-There's no dispute here. Summer or winter, the Torres del Paine National Park in south Chile is where you will take the most photos. Rugged mountains jutting into the air above pristine lakes and immense glaciers make this little-known destination one that should be on everybody's itinerary.
- Most exciting spot-When the tourist bus dropped us at the Moreno Glacier in southern Argentina and announced that we would be there for four hours, I groaned. That long to watch ice melt? Four hours later, Polly was persuading the bus driver to wait for me as she tried to tear me away from the observation point. Watching huge chunks of ice crash into the water creating humongous waves is a thrill beyond description.
- Most inspirational point-Machu Picchu in Peru-after the tourist groups leave for the evening and before they arrive in the morning. Arrange to stay at the hotel at the top of the mountain, then spend some quiet hours viewing the scenery and contemplating the mystery of this most famous ancient ruin.

- Best Kuchen-That's right, with many of the southern cone countries populated by Germans who arrived as early as the mid 1800's, German bakeries are common. Our favorite was the Bavarian Crème-filled kuchen at Delicias in the delightful Chilean town of Valdivia. I can still taste it.
- Best ice cream-actually, any ice cream you buy in Argentina is fantastic. But, you can't surpass the Chocolate Almargo at the Chocolate Turista chocolate store on Mitre Street in the center of Bariloche. Go ahead and indulge, get the largest cone with the biggest scoops--you may not pass this way again soon. Polly also gives honorable mention to the Russian Cream ice cream she bought in Rosario.
- Most fascinating place-This one is our only point of disagreement. I pick the Gatun Locks on the edge of the Panama Canal where a visitor can watch ships raised or lowered three levels as they pass from ocean to ocean. The locks are an engineering marvel almost a century old. Polly chooses the Santa Catalina Convent in Arequipa, Peru with its labyrinth of walkways, cubbyhole rooms, period furniture and paintings. It is a miniature walled colonial town in the middle of the city.
- Best Andean crossing-Robert and Daisy Kunstaetter of the excellent Quito-based *Latin American Travel Advisor* newsletter put us on to this one. Start in Puerto Varas in Chile and take the bus-boat-bus-boat-bus-boat-bus trip across several outstanding lakes, including Lago Todos Los Santos, Lago Frías and Lago Nahuel Huapi to Bariloche in Argentina. Be sure to spend the night at Hotel Peulla half way across--the scenery is unforgettable and the food outstanding. Or you can do the trip in reverse if that suits your schedule. We've made the passage in winter and spring. We need to do it in summer and fall, then we'll start all over.
- Most beautiful lake-Having just honored Lago Todo Los Santos with its emerald green color, waterfalls and the Orsono Volcano reflecting in its waters, we will go for Lake Atitlan in Guatemala. Beautiful blue waters and mountains plunging down into the lake along the shoreline make the trip across this lake unforgettable.
- Most beautiful volcano-Having just honored the perfectly cone-shaped Orsono Volcano in Chile, we will choose Mt. Cotopaxi that, when visible, sets a beautiful backdrop to the city of Quito. Maybe we are biased because we lived there for almost eight years and never tired of seeing it.
- Most interesting market-Our bias may show through again, but the Saturday morning market at Otavalo in northern Ecuador can't be beat for its woven goods, woodcarvings and delightful Indian population. The prices can't be beat either.
- *Least* classifiable-How do you classify a city like Ushuaia, Argentina the southern most city in the world? Beautiful? -of course, ringed by snow-capped mountains in the winter, some of them of a Disney-like castle variety. Exciting? -naturally, who can forget Rumbo Sur's boat tour of the Beagle channel, passing the city's famous lighthouse, islands populated by birds and seals, and occasional sightings of whales. Fascinating? -just being that far south, in Tierra del Fuego, surrounded by parks, mountains, water and interesting history is good enough. But put them all together and you'll keep going back.

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