



10 OF THE Best ECO-LODGES

Get back to nature with these low-impact lodges, writes Laura Holt

There's something distinctly Latin American about the modern-day eco-lodge: from the beaches of Nicaragua to the plains of Patagonia, these vast natural habitats invite accommodation that gets us closer to the environment.

Their remote locations – beside jungle, footprint-free sand or wildlife-rich riverbanks – also mean the homegrown hotel chains and enterprising individuals behind them have had to be creative. Tasked with offering low-impact luxury, they've built retreats that enhance rather than hinder our experience of the natural world.

Be they simple huts or quirky cabins, newcomers spearheading the turnaround of a nation's fortunes or old hands that have set the agenda for 40 years, each eco-lodge offers an escape that is unique to its own environment.

1 CHALALAN, BOLIVIA
This Bolivian bolthole stands on the shores of Chalalan Lagoon.

"It's a bit of an adventure to get there," says Claire Milner of Journey Latin America. "If the river is low, you may have to scramble out of the boat onto an island, possibly sharing it with a family of capybaras, while the canoe scrapes over the shallows. The guides, all from the local community, are excellent, and experts on their patch of jungle."

Accommodation at this Amazonian outpost is in fuss-free thatched huts, surrounded by birdsong, though there are three luxury cabins with double

beds and private en-suites. The property was built by Conservation International in association with the indigenous community.

BOOK IT: Journey Latin America has a three-night stay at Chalalan from £750, including flights from La Paz, full-board and excursions. journeylatinamerica.co.uk

2 CRISTALINO, BRAZIL
In a patch of forest amid Brazil's southern Amazon, Cristalino puts clients within reach of 200 bird species, 2,000 types of butterfly, tapirs, giant otters and jaguars. Standard rooms are rustic, but luxurious bungalows feature outdoor showers or bathtubs, and the lodge's position in a private reserve gives unrivalled access to the world's largest rainforest.

John Melton of Reef and Rainforest Tours says: "The lodge sits on the edge of the Cristalino River, near the town of Alta Floresta and, with its trail network, boat trips and 50-metre canopy towers, is one of the best places to see Amazonian flora and fauna."

BOOK IT: Reef and Rainforest's 10-day Brazil tour, which features four nights' full-board at Cristalino, costs from £2,979, including flights and tours. reefandrainforest.co.uk

3 MASHPI LODGE, ECUADOR
Since opening in 2012, Mashpi has set a new standard: 3,000ft high in the Ecuadorian Andes, it looks over cloud forest that provides refuge for rare animals, employs 80% of its staff from the local

community, and engages in wildlife projects. Its striking floor-to-ceiling glass structure was even constructed in Quito and then transferred to the jungle to limit any environmental impact.

Kerry Holligan of Abercrombie & Kent says: "Having lived in Ecuador and visited this area of cloud forest before, I came away with a new perspective after Mashpi. They use local produce and each group gets a local guide and English-speaking biologist."

BOOK IT: Abercrombie & Kent has three nights from £1,550, with all-inclusive meals and transfers. abercrombiekent.co.uk

4 LAPA RIOS, COSTA RICA
Costa Rica's popularity is set to soar even further with British Airways' just-launched route to San Jose, but the Osa Peninsula on the Pacific coast remains untouched. It's been that way since two US Peace Corps workers moved here in the 1990s with the dream of transforming it into a private reserve, and Lapa Rios is now an award-winning retreat, known for sustainable tourism as much as wildlife.

Seventeen thatched bungalows come with complimentary Costa Rican coffee delivered each morning, and a pool overlooking the Pacific combines jungle adventures with waterside wildlife-spotting as dolphins, whales and turtles drift by. **BOOK IT:** Lapa Rios is featured on Cox & Kings' 11-night private Luxury Tour of Costa Rica, from £3,095 including flights. coxandkings.co.uk

5 DON ENRIQUE, ARGENTINA
This lesser-known retreat in Argentina's isolated Misiones province is one to impress. Four boutique cabins overlooking the aptly-named Rio Paraiso provide space to spot everything from otters to ocelots, while the surrounding forest has an array of birdlife.

With so few rooms, service is personalised and the location lends itself to solitude, according to Rosie Tobin of RealWorld Holidays. She says: "After a busy two weeks in Argentina, having some downtime at Don Enrique was fantastic: no TV, no phone calls, just days relaxing on the balcony, strolling through the jungle and swimming in the river. The kayaking is a must; we saw loads of birds and other wildlife on the riverbanks."

BOOK IT: RealWorld Holidays' 10-day Argentina tour includes four nights' full-board at Don Enrique, from £1,595. realworldholidays.co.uk

6 INKATERRA, PERU
Since 1975, Inkaterra has emerged as an ecotourism leader: with six lodges, it connects travellers with Peru's natural and man-made wonders, from the slopes of the Sacred Valley to the cobbles of Cusco. Scientific research underpins everything, with 814 bird varieties, 365 ant species, 313 butterflies and 100 mammals catalogued in the group's grounds over 40 years.

The Inkaterra Reserva Amazonica outpost, on the

RIGHT:
EcoCamp, Chile

FAR RIGHT:
Inkaterra Reserva
Amazonica, Peru

BELOW:
Morgan's Rock,
Nicaragua



banks of the Madre de Dios River, is a 25-minute flight from Cusco, with 35 wooden cabanas and a 98ft canopy walkway, one of South America's largest.

"We offer a three-day trip where guests arrive by motorised canoe and enjoy a guided walk and twilight river cruise," says Travel 2's Emily Underhill. "All tours are led by naturalist guides and guests choose from spotting otters on Sandoval Lake to a boat trip to Gamitana Creek, home of piranhas and caimans."

BOOK IT: Travel 2's four-day Reserva Amazonica Lodge Independent Tour costs £599, from September 1-December 12, with full-board, tours and transfers. travel2.com

7 MORGAN'S ROCK, NICARAGUA

Nicaragua's transformation from edgy backwater to up-and-coming escape was sealed by this luxury opening in 2004. On the Pacific Coast, the lodge is enveloped by 4,000 acres of jungle, with a mile-long arc of sand dotted with thatched palapas (open-sided dwellings) and nesting turtles. Excursions span from horseriding to reeling in red snapper on a fishing tour,



The downtime at Don Enrique is fantastic: no TV, no phone calls, just days strolling through the jungle

plus its 15 beach bungalows boast floor-to-ceiling windows and private decks with outdoor showers and hanging daybeds.

BOOK IT: Latin Odyssey's 17-night Highlights of Nicaragua tour, including three nights at Morgan's Rock, starts at £2,550, including tours, transfers and half-board accommodation. latinodyssey.com

8 MAYA MOUNTAIN, BELIZE

While much of Belize's tourism revolves around the coast and its spectacular scuba-diving, Maya Mountain sets itself apart. Located in the mountains near San Ignacio, a vibrant inland town at the heart of Cayo District, this is the place for exotic wellness. Traditional thatched lodging, decked out

in tropical hues, matches a comprehensive spa programme covering yoga, pilates, massages and life-coaching, plus there are visits to the Mayan ruins at Tikal, canoeing and waterfall tours.

BOOK IT: Vidados offers five nights at Maya Mountain from £923, including transfers, full-board, yoga and pilates, cooking lessons, a health assessment and Swedish massage.

vidados.com

9 ECOCAMP, CHILE

The adventure begins even before reaching this camp in Chile's Torres del Paine National Park, as the EcoCamp team runs regular transfers from Argentine gateway El Calafate, from Punta Arenas for connections from Santiago, and from Puerto Natales for guests arriving from a Tierra del Fuego cruise. Whatever their route, guests inch ever-closer to a landscape where nature dominates, staying in geodesic domes at the foot of the park's Cordillera mountain range.

For walkers, there are multi-day hikes around the W Trek; thrill-seekers can tackle the park on foot, horseback, kayak and bike

on a Multi-Sport Adventure; while nature lovers can spot guanacos, rheas, condors and pumas.

BOOK IT: From £978 for a five-day Patagonian Wildlife Safari staying in a Standard Dome, with transfers, all-inclusive meals and tours.

ecocamp.travel

10 MERECUMBE, COLOMBIA

A brisk shower greets guests at this Colombian lodge, standing amid the shore-side foothills of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, the world's highest coastal mountain range. Hot water is one of many sacrifices for the environment, but some swaps are worth making: television and Wi-Fi are replaced by peace and serenity; lovely, lonely beaches offer room for reflection; and cabins come with L'Occitane toiletries and hammock-strung decks, perfect for watching hummingbirds. Activities range from visiting Valencia Falls to beachfront massages.

BOOK IT: Sunvil's 12-night Colombia itinerary costs from £3,659, with three nights at Merecumbe, flights, transfers, full-board and tours.

sunvil.co.uk

