

Latin lessons

By Season

Don't get confused by Latin America's topsy-turvy seasons

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PICTURE: LATIN ROUTES

At 19 years old, I swanned off for a summer of backpacking in Latin America with one woolly jumper in my rucksack. I know, I know. Can I blame it on being young, or do I have to put my hand up for stupid too?

My failure to undertake even the most basic investigation into the weather in Chile, Bolivia and Peru during July and August meant I had no choice but to wear my only sweater every day for six weeks. Needless to say, I was never anyone's first choice to sit next to on the bus.

As with most of the world, the time of year you visit different areas of Latin America will result in very different types of holiday. And it's not just down to the weather, which, as we're talking about the southern hemisphere, runs in patterns opposite to the UK. From wildlife migrations to annual festivals, doing the research about what's going on in advance will vastly improve your client's holiday experience.

Below, we've suggested when it's a great time to visit certain areas and destinations, and why. However this doesn't necessarily mean it's disastrous at any other time of year – just make sure you at least check out the climate patterns first. To avoid confusion, when we say spring, we mean spring in the UK, rather than the weather pattern in destination.

► SPRING

While flowers are blooming and bunnies are hopping around in the Northern Hemisphere, in Argentina it's time to bring in the harvest. In Mendoza, this means grapes for its most famous export – wine. The National Grape Harvest Festival is a 10-day event starting on the first Friday in March which culminates in a grand ceremony attended by more than 20,000 people in Mendoza city, with music, fireworks, hundreds of dancers and the crowning of a festival queen. Wine-wise, there are public tastings, special menus and wine pairings at restaurants – even the local McDonald's serves wine.

Seasons may be topsy-turvy, but religious celebrations stay the same the world over, so spring means Easter everywhere. However, few destinations take it quite as seriously as the Catholic countries of Latin America, with some of the most famous – and showy – celebrations taking place in the city of Antigua in Guatemala. Its Semana Santa, or holy week, begins on Ash Wednesday and runs throughout the Easter weekend. Forget our rather half-hearted efforts with chocolate eggs: here the streets are carpeted in brightly coloured designs made from sawdust, fruit and flowers depicting the last days of Christ, alongside Mayan symbols, and there are

processions of religious floats flanked by locals in purple robes.

There are many good times to visit the Galapagos, but clients who go in April and May will enjoy the benefit of calm, warm seas, blue skies, and prices and crowd numbers that are lower than those in the following months, when it's peak season.

It's a beautiful time of year to experience these unique islands. Cox & Kings' Kimberley Hay says: "Wildlife activities are rife. The eggs of marine iguanas and sea turtles begin to hatch, and many birds begin their courtship rituals, including the unmistakable blue-footed boobies." Clients who snorkel and dive will benefit from great visibility under water.

► SUMMER

With a direct flight with British Airways to Lima launching in May, this summer is an even better time than usual to send clients to Peru. This isn't the only reason. "For those visiting Peru in June, don't miss Inti Raymi, The Festival of the Sun, which is the most important festival of the year and is held in the streets of Cuzco," says Travel 2's Emily Underhill. Nine days of street parties culminate in the main procession, which stretches from the Sun Temple to the ruins of Sacsayhuaman fortress, where crowds wait to see the colourfully costumed king and queen take part in an ancient Inca ceremony

to honour the sun god, complete with a – pretend, thankfully – sacrifice.

August will see the Olympics come to Rio de Janeiro – the first time the Games has been held in South America. If clients are lucky enough to be attending the chances are they'll have their tickets and flights sorted already, at least for the portion of the time they're in Rio. If they want to extend their trip, suggest time in the Pantanal. It may be less well known than the Amazon, but this vast wetland actually has far more wildlife on show, especially at this time of year, when the lagoons shrink and animals congregate at the water that remains. Visitors are likely to spot capybara, caiman and giant anteaters, they may well see ocelot and tapirs, and if they're very lucky, perhaps a jaguar or an anaconda.

If you have clients who are getting ski withdrawal while Europe and North America basks in summer sun, then send them south. Argentina's lake district around Bariloche receives snowfall at this time of year, with the most famous resort of Cerro Catedral offering 1,480 acres of skiing.

► AUTUMN

Anyone who loves resurrecting their inner child and embracing Halloween should time their trip to Mexico to coincide with the Day of the Dead. This

→ annual celebration dates back to the Aztecs, who believed the gates of heaven open at midnight on October 31 to allow the spirits of dead children to reunite with their families for 24 hours – dead adults return on November 2. Altars are decorated with candles, buckets of flowers, handmade art, fruit and traditional foods such as the 'pan de muerto' loaf, and there are often carnival-like processions with costumes. Suggest clients head for Oaxaca or Merida for particularly fabulous celebrations.



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continent, it's prime whale-watching time at Argentina's Peninsula Valdes. This is the time southern right whales gather to feed before beginning their migration north. Latin Routes' Martin Johnson says: "The number of whales has been steadily increasing by approximately 7% year on year, and you can expect about 70 more whales each season. The best way to see them is on one of the whale-watching trips that leaves from the town of Puerto Pirámides."



Rainbow Tours includes Antigua on its 13-day Classic Guatemala and Belize tour, with departures during Easter week. From £3,055 including flights from the UK. rainbowtours.co.uk

Journey Latin America offers 21 days in Peru taking in the Inti Raymi festival in Cusco in June and visiting Lima, Lake Titicaca, Colca Canyon and Machu Picchu. From £3,688, including flights, transport, breakfast and mid-range hotels. journeylatinamerica.co.uk

Latin Routes offers a two-week holiday in Chilean and Argentinean Patagonia, Buenos Aires and Santiago in October/November from £3,299, including flights, mid-range hotels, transfers, some tours, guiding and activities. latinroutes.co.uk

Cox & Kings offers a nine-day package to Easter Island and Santiago for the 2017 Rapa Nui festival from £2,295 including flights, accommodation with breakfast and some excursions. coxandkings.co.uk



TOP: Summer: Inti Raymi, Peru

ABOVE LEFT: Spring: Semana Santa, Guatemala

LEFT: Autumn: Peninsula Valdes

RIGHT: Winter: Rio Carnival

WINTER

There's no choice about this one. The season to visit Antarctica runs through our winter, with cruises operating from November to March when it's summer on the white continent, with – relatively – warmer temperatures and longer days. A wide variety of weather – sun, rain, sleet and snow – should be expected at any time during the season, and the temperature can change by the hour. It'll all seem worthwhile, though, as clients cruise past epic icebergs and spot colonies of penguins, seals lazing on ice floes and nine types of whales.

While Europe shivers, it's party time in Latin America. It's so popular that prices can be high, but Carnival in Rio is one of the world's biggest parties, lasting four days. Journey Latin America's Laura Rendell-Dunn says: "To join the main festivities you must head to the Sambodromo, the main arena where the various samba schools show off their flamboyant

costumes and jaw-dropping samba steps. With direct flights from London to Rio, you can leave Heathrow at 10pm and be checking into your Copacabana hotel by 7am the next morning."

This is by no means the only festival at this time of year. Bookish types could head to Colombia for the Cartagena Hay Festival. Set in the beautiful colonial old town, it holds talks and readings, with translations so it suits both Spanish and English speaking audiences. There are film screening and music concerts too.

For something more unusual, suggest a visit to Easter Island for the Tapati Rapa Nui cultural festival. This remote island, famous for its carved stone 'moai' heads, holds festivities for the first two weeks of February, with highlights including triathlon, horse-racing, dance competitions and even the Haka Pei, where competitors slide down the island's steepest slope on banana tree trunks. TW



PICTURE: EMBRATUR

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