

Planes, trains and automobiles

Getting around South and Central America can be half the fun, finds Sarah Gordon

There has never been a better time to explore Latin America. With more direct flights from the UK, ever-expanding regional routes and tour operators offering hugely varied trips, now is the time to help clients plan their dream trip.

Stretching from Mexico down to Chile and Argentina, these are lands stitched together by the soaring Andes, crowned by the mighty Amazon rainforest and home to the Galapagos Islands that inspired Charles Darwin's theory of evolution. They're where Incas, Aztecs and Mayans built awe-inspiring temples and

Spanish conquistadors created beautiful colonial cities.

According to Cox & Kings, British Airways' growing network of direct flights to Peru, Chile and Costa Rica, combined with the launch of South America's first luxury sleeper train in Peru, helped spark a 30% growth in bookings in the months after the train went on sale.

Trips are easy to plan as Britons don't need to apply for visas in advance of travel for any Latin American country except Cuba. And in Central America, British tourists may travel between Honduras, Nicaragua,

El Salvador and Nicaragua for up to 90 days without completing entry and exit formalities at border immigration checkpoints.

So, what should you look out for when planning a trip for customers?

Colin Stewart, chairman of the Latin American Travel Association, suggests avoiding the pitfall of trying to squeeze the entire region into one trip.

He says: "One way to approach an itinerary in Latin America is to choose one country or one bucket-list experience and build an itinerary around it. So, for example, the Rio Carnival

could be part of a bigger Brazil itinerary, or it could be combined with Buenos Aires in Argentina or Montevideo in Uruguay."

Here, we highlight some of the best twin and multi-centre combinations that make the most of the region's varied transport links, so clients can squeeze every drop of excitement out of their journey around South or Central America.

▶ PLANES

A flurry of new routes is opening up Latin America and making it easier to plan multi-centre itineraries. Just be



→ aware when booking short-haul flights within the region, as baggage weight limits on regional or domestic flights are lower than on international legs.

Flights between the main Andean nations take between two and three hours, making them easy to combine in one two-week holiday, so pairing the Inca ruins of Peru with Ecuador's dazzling Galapagos Islands won't mean days wasted in travel time.

For scenic variety, Audley Travel recommends taking advantage of regional flights to combine southern Peru, Bolivia and the vast Atacama Desert in northern Chile, all in one trip.

Just remember when planning these high-altitude destinations to factor in acclimatisation days in interesting places, as sites such as Lake Titicaca, spanning Peru and Bolivia, sit at a breathless altitude of 3,800m.

Cox & Kings recommends taking advantage of a new direct Avianca flight from Colombian capital Bogota to Cusco in Peru. It means clients can combine Caribbean beaches, coffee plantations and the Amazon rainforest with the Inca culture of Cusco, the Sacred Valley and Machu Picchu, bypassing a stop-off in Lima and an extra flight.

Alternatively, Gillian Howe, managing director at Geodyssey, suggests combining Peru and Bolivia. "After exploring the classic sights of southern Peru, you visit Cusco and then fly direct to La Paz in Bolivia in only 45 minutes," she says. "From



Pairing Peru's Inca ruins with Ecuador's dazzling Galapagos Islands doesn't mean days wasted in travel time

there, you can fly direct to Uyuni and the stunning landscapes of salt flats and deserts in southern Bolivia, and travel on to the colonial city of Sucre and the silver mines of Potosi."

Journey Latin America's Laura Rendell-Dunn warns that when planning tours around Brazil, there are no direct flights between Rio de Janeiro and Manaus, the gateway to the Amazon. So, if you are planning a jungle experience for clients, factor in a night in Manaus so they can relax before the two to three-hour trip onwards to their jungle lodge.

▶ TRAINS

This year, Latin America's first luxury sleeper train, the Belmond Andean Explorer, launched in Peru. The sleek navy and cream locomotive trundles across the altiplano (high plains), connecting the pretty colonial city of Arequipa with Lake Titicaca and the former Inca capital Cusco.

For customers on longer trips, recommend they bring a smaller bag



PICTURES: TRAVEL BUENOS AIRES/CHAGU; SHUTTERSTOCK; TURISMO CHILE

for their cabin, as bigger suitcases will be stored away to save on space. The Andean Explorer can also be combined with the Belmond Hiram Bingham, which offers luxury day trips from Cusco to Machu Picchu.

The Tren Crucero is a unique way to explore Ecuador's highlands and coast. Pulled by a steam locomotive, the train spends three nights winding its way from the capital Quito to Guayaquil,

on the Pacific coast, via indigenous markets and stunning national parks. Overnight accommodation is in haciendas and hotels along the route, while from Guayaquil, clients can fly on to the Galapagos Islands.

▶ AUTOMOBILES

For clients who don't want to keep hopping on and off flights, Central America comes into its own, with

much smaller distances to cover than in South America. It is becoming more popular with UK visitors and the Central America Tourism Agency is predicting a 27% increase in British visitor numbers by 2020.

One popular route is to follow the Mayan trail through the rich jungles of southern Mexico, visiting Guatemala's Mayan ruins and colonial towns, and the islands of Belize. The travel times are relatively short and border crossings are easy with the help of a tour guide (although keep in mind that clients leaving Belize overland must pay an exit tax of \$20 in cash).

According to Journey Latin America, wildlife-filled Costa Rica is also ideal for combining with its neighbours, and crossing the border means avoiding the journey back to the capital San José to catch a flight. After exploring rainforests, cloud forests and glowing volcanoes, clients can head north from Arenal National Park to Peñas Blancas, where they can easily cross into Nicaragua and visit Lake Nicaragua and the splendid colonial city Granada. Alternatively, from Costa Rica's Caribbean coast, it is easy to cross south into the highlands and coffee plantations of Panama.

South America may be larger, but



ABOVE: Buenos Aires

LEFT: Salt flats in Chile



Wendy Wu Tours offers a 14-day Essence of Argentina and Brazil tour that features tango in Buenos Aires, the Tren a Las Nubes, the Humahuaca Valley, Iguazu Falls and Rio de Janeiro. Prices start at £3,990, including flights, accommodation and some meals. The first departure is September 10. wendywutours.co.uk/agents

Kuoni offers a small-group tour, Mayan Explorer, through Mexico, Belize and Guatemala, with visits to Mayan sites at Tulum, Xunantunich, Tikal, Palenque, Uxmal and Chichen Itza. The eight-night tour starts at £2,236, including flights. kuoni.co.uk

On the water

There is another way to explore Latin America – by boat. Expedition cruise operators such as Australis and Skorpios connect the wilds of Patagonia in Chile and Argentina, sailing through the Beagle Channel and Magellan Strait, calling at Cape Horn and, on some voyages, even the Antarctic.

Farther north in Argentina, ferries cross the River Plate from Buenos Aires to the Uruguayan capital Montevideo in three hours, or to the pretty, cobbled Uruguayan town of Colonia in just 60 minutes.

And while it's a short flight from Peru into Bolivia, a more romantic way to



cross between the countries is by boat on Lake Titicaca. The highest navigable lake in the world is shared by the two countries, so it is possible to travel from one to another by combining boat and bus travel to cross the border.



LEFT: Ruta 40, Argentina