

The 10 wonders of South America to discover this winter

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The Spanish word for best is “mejor”. Latin Americans, fiercely competitive at life as on the football pitch, love to tell travellers about their country’s mejor beach, city, festival, food, dance – anything, really, except mejor politician.

Invariably, national pride precludes any semblance of objectivity. No Argentine would ever recommend a Brazilian meal. Peruvians would sooner quaff battery acid than a glass of Chilean pisco.

As a regular visitor to South America some of my “bests” change over time, some stay the same. I’ve been blown away by so many experiences, places, hotels, people. La Paz’s Gran Poder festival was a whirl. Two separate long hikes to Machu Picchu were equally memorable.

Summer in South America is special. The ocean mists lift and bring sunshine back to Lima and Santiago de Chile. South America hits the beach, big style – January and February are peak holiday months in Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Uruguay.

Punta del Este gets balmy, Rio bakes, even chilly Patagonia warms up, and the national parks of the south are open for hiking, biking, camping and dips in the lakes – well, some of them. The Pantanal gets its life-giving rains, opening up new channels into the enchanting flooded forests. It’s cruise season in Tierra del Fuego, the Falklands and Antarctica.

All go, in short, and that’s what you should do if you want to escape the lowering clouds and fading light of the north as autumn and winter enshroud us once again.

Best beach: José Ignacio, Uruguay

From November to April, the southeast corner of Uruguay hosts one of South America's hippest beach scenes. The weather isn't as stifling as Brazil to the north, the Atlantic nothing like as chilly as in Argentina to the south. Punta del Este is the main city, but cooler spots are to the north, at La Barra and, especially, José Ignacio.

As a seasonal resort, the latter comes to life for summer, with pop-up restaurants, international DJs and a rich mix of Europeans, Americans and Latin Americans flying in for a weekend or longer.

Hot hangouts include the dashing Playa Vik hotel, La Susana Beach Restaurant for delectable fish and seafood and, inland, the Alto de Ballena winery and El Garzón, where Argentine celeb chef Francis Mallman holds fort over his fire-inspired kitchen.

Best wine region: Colchagua Valley, Chile

One hundred miles south of Santiago, the Colchagua Valley – situated between the Andes and the coastal mountain range – is known for its balmy Mediterranean climate, automobile museum, steam-powered “wine train” and esteemed wineries such as Casa Silva, Montes and Santa Cruz. The granitic and volcanic soils and hot sun are best suited to red wines – carménères are outstanding.

Many vineyards host tours and tastings, while the Lapostolle Clos Apalta has Relais & Château residences and a superb restaurant and the Viña Vik hotel and winery, in the Millahue valley – just north of the main Colchagua region – is a Bilbao-inspired titanium-roofed architectural wonder with commanding views of the vine rows – particularly lush in summer as harvest approaches. In Spring 2019, Puro Vik, with 19 glass-walled bungalows and a wine-themed spa, opened.