

SOUTHAMERICA HIGHLIGHTS

SIMON FAIRBAIRN AND ERIN MCNEANEY

Never Ending Voyage

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Introduction

We spent a year travelling slowly through South America exploring white sandy beaches, bug-filled jungles, snow-capped mountains, tranquil villages and elegant colonial cities. We danced the tango, learnt Spanish, sampled local wines, galloped horses through Wild West scenery, drove through lunar landscapes, got up close with alligators and monkeys in the Amazon rainforest, volunteered at a remote Andean school, and trekked amongst giant wax palms. All while making a living as digital nomads.

In this ebook we share a selection of our favourite places on this vast continent—some are well known and others more off the beaten track. We didn't visit every country in South America, as we prefer to travel slowly, so rather than being a comprehensive guide this book is a starting point. We hope you find it useful in planning your trip to South America, or just enjoy the photos and dream of future travels.



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Cover image: Sunrise on the Salar de Uyuni, Bolivia

Design and layout by [Simon Fairbairn](http://NeverEndingVoyage.com)

About Us



We are Simon Fairbairn and Erin McNeaney, a British couple who sold everything to travel the world forever.

In 2008 we spent a year travelling around the world and experienced more in that year than we had in the previous ten. We met some wonderful people, saw some amazing places and did some incredible things. It was awe-inspiring and beautiful and frustrating and scary and exciting—it was everything but dull.

On our return to the UK, we found it very difficult to get back into the routine that we'd left behind. The mortgage, the bills, the car, our accumulated junk, the tedious repetitiveness of the nine to five—having experienced the vastness of the world and all of the opportunity out there, we struggled to fit back into business as usual.

So we decided to head off again, but this time we left for good. We sold everything we owned, quit our jobs, rented out our house, bought a one way ticket to Rio and headed out to play dice with destiny. Since March 2010 we've been travelling the world as digital nomads and making a living from our travel blog and iOS app business **Voyage Travel Apps**. We spent our first year in South America and then moved on to Central and North America, Europe and now Asia.

We write about our travels and the highs and lows of being a digital nomad on our blog **Never Ending Voyage**.

BRAZIL

The name Brazil conjures up images of samba music, colourfully dressed dancers at Carnaval, white sandy beaches and the Amazon rainforest. You'll find all of that and more. We spent just 2.5 weeks in Brazil as it was much more expensive than we expected, and limited our stay to Rio state. A few months later we popped back over the border from Argentina on a day trip to visit the Brazilian side of the immense Iguazu Falls.





Santa Teresa, Rio de Janeiro

An alternative, bohemian side to the *cidade maravilhosa*
(marvellous city)

We loved the vibrant energy in Rio from the lively samba scene in Lapa to the jubilant *futebol* fans at Maracana Stadium and the beautiful people of Ipanema Beach, but what surprised us most was its quieter side. We stayed in the historic hilltop neighbourhood Santa Teresa and fell for its cobblestone streets, colourful street art, crumbling colonial mansions and peaceful European-style plazas. Where else can you wake up in

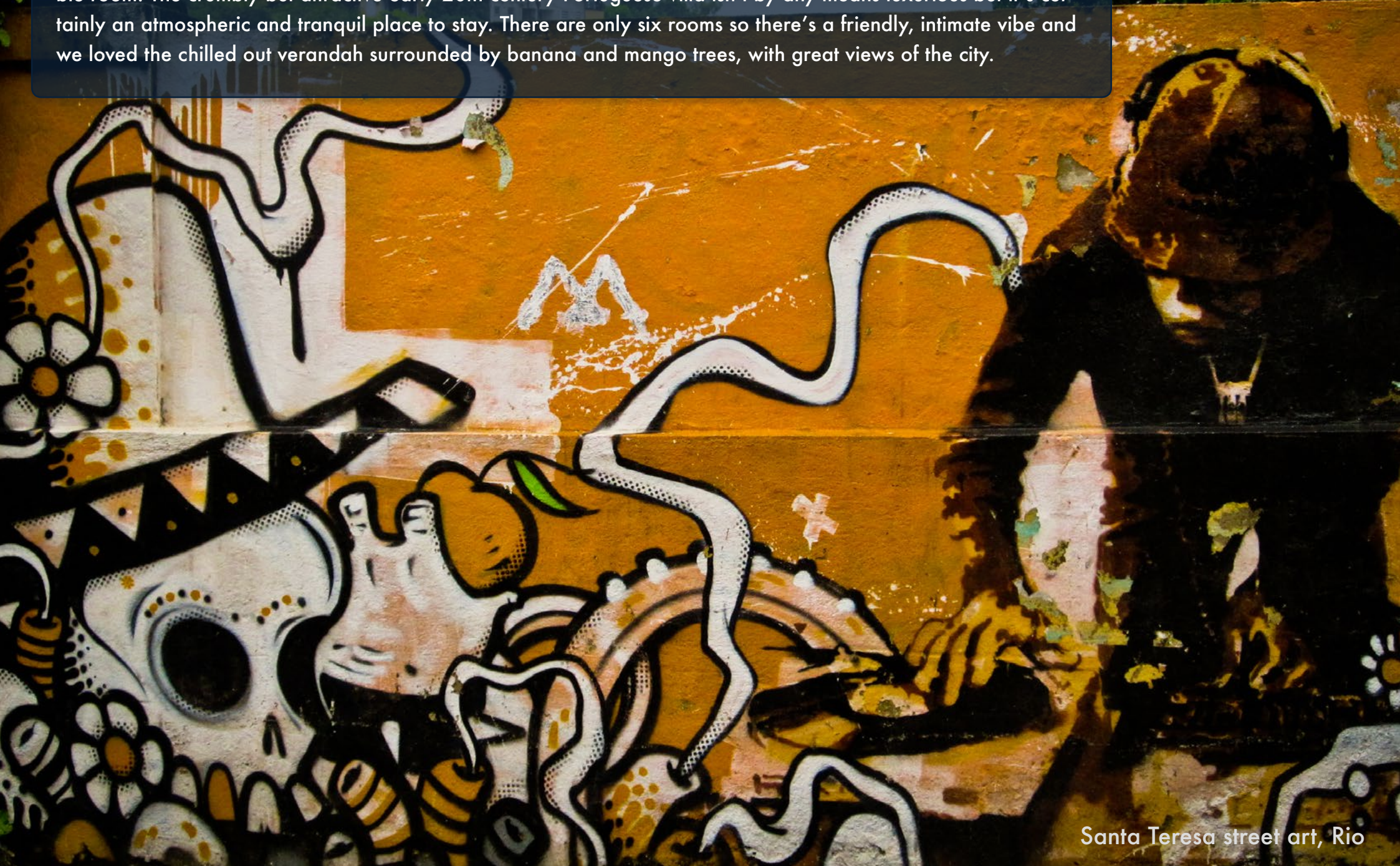
a city of over 11 million people and hear no traffic noise? Santa Teresa is amazingly quiet with a small town vibe that feels a world away from the busy centre and the soulless high-rises of the southern beaches. The streets are green and tree-lined, and we watched birds and even a monkey in the banana trees next to our guesthouse.

It's a neighbourhood populated by locals not tourists, and the street art is evidence of the artists that live in the area. The pretty, sleepy plaza of Largo das Neves, with a tiny white-washed church and a couple of bohemian, open-sided bars was our favourite place to pass the time sipping beer, eating surprisingly good pizza and people watching. If you want to experience Rio's famous nightlife, Lapa is only a 10 minute walk away down hill—here you'll find many samba clubs and a huge Friday night street party.

Read more about Santa Teresa:

🌿 **Santa Teresa: An Alternative Side to Rio**

Hotel Tip: Accommodation is expensive in Rio and **Villa Leonor** in Santa Teresa is great value for an ensuite double room. The crumbly but attractive early 20th century Portuguese villa isn't by any means luxurious but it's certainly an atmospheric and tranquil place to stay. There are only six rooms so there's a friendly, intimate vibe and we loved the chilled out verandah surrounded by banana and mango trees, with great views of the city.



Santa Teresa street art, Rio

Ilha Grande

White sandy beaches and jungle treks

For white sandy beaches and turquoise sea against a backdrop of lush green hills head to Ilha Grande, only 150km from Rio. It's not an undiscovered island, with cruise ships making almost daily appearances, but the atmosphere is very relaxed and the main village Abraão is still pleasantly small. It's easy to escape the crowds by hiking through the jungle to visit waterfalls and empty beaches. The most famous beach is Lopes Mendes and justifiably so—the long white beach

is stunning and its size and isolated location mean it's easy to find a stretch of sand to yourself.

There are no cars, ATMs or WiFi on Ilha Grande so it's a peaceful escape. Make sure you bring plenty of cash—it isn't cheap and you may end up staying longer than planned.

Read more about Ilha Grande:

👉 **Brazil's Costa Verde**



Ilha Grande

Paraty

Cobbled streets and colonial mansions

The coastal town of Paraty is easily reached from Ilha Grande or Rio. Boat trips are available to islands in the area but we just enjoyed wandering around the car-less historic centre with its cobblestone streets and pretty colonial buildings. It's a relaxed place to spend a few days exploring and chilling out in one of the quiet plazas.



Capela de Santa Rita, Paraty

Iguazu Falls

A panoramic view of the epic waterfall

As one of the biggest tourist attractions in South America we were a little concerned that Iguazu Falls would disappoint. We needn't have worried—nothing can prepare you for the sight of such an immense wall of water. It's definitely worth visiting both the Argentine and Brazilian sides for different perspectives. We stayed in Puerto Iguazu in Argentina and made a day trip to Brazil.



Iguazu Falls, Brazil

The Brazilian side is all about the overview—as you walk along the cliffside, you get a sense of the size of the place and the sheer number of different and interesting ways that water can tumble over rock. That's not to say there aren't opportunities to get up close and very wet—walkways allow you to walk out near the bottom of the falls - so take waterproofs!

Read more about Iguazu Falls:

🌀 **The Mighty Iguazu Falls**

ARGENTINA

Argentina is 2,263 miles long and stretches from the rainforests of the northeast to the glaciers in the south. There's a huge variety of scenery with plenty of natural attractions and outside adventures to enjoy, as well as the most cosmopolitan city on the continent.

Argentina was one of our favourite countries in South America, and the one we'd most like to return to. We travelled slowly rather than extensively focusing on Buenos Aires and Salta where we spent two months each, with side trips to Iguazu Falls and small towns in Northwest Argentina.



Feria de Mataderos, Buenos Aires

Buenos Aires

The most elegant city in South America

We fell for Buenos Aires as do most visitors. It's a sophisticated, beautiful city with a European vibe and South American energy. It's the perfect place to take a break from travelling, rent an apartment, take Spanish classes and immerse yourself in *porteño* life.

La Boca neighbourhood, Buenos Aires



Learn to dance tango or check out the very late night night-clubs; eat giant, affordable steaks or seek out the city's gourmet vegetarian scene; wander around the diverse barrios from trendy Palermo to gritty La Boca; drink *mate* (the local herby brew) and play guitar with locals on a Sunday afternoon in one of the huge parks in Recoleta or Palermo;

explore art galleries and take a history tour to learn more about the city's turbulent recent past; delve into gaucho culture at the little-visited *Feria de Mataderos*; and don't forget to eat your weight in *helado*—it's the best gelato outside of Italy (and they deliver!).

Read more about Buenos Aires:

- 🌀 **Buenos Aires Highlights**
- 🌀 **Exploring Argentina's Gaucho Country**
- 🌀 **Ways to Learn Spanish in Buenos Aires**
- 🌀 **The Best Vegetarian Restaurants in Buenos Aires**

Restaurant Tip: *Puerta Cerrada* (closed door) restaurants in private homes are popular in Buenos Aires and make a unique eating experience. We attended a dinner party along with 10 others at **Casa Saltshaker** which is run by American Dan and his Peruvian partner Henri in their Recoleta apartment. Not only was the five course gourmet meal delicious but we also met some interesting people from all around the world.



Dancers at Feria de Mataderos, Buenos Aires

San Antonio de Areco

Gauche culture in a sleepy town close to Buenos Aires



San Antonio de Areco

Although Argentina is often described as European the gaucho culture is distinctly South American and you don't have to venture far from the capital to explore it. San Antonio de Areco is only two hours from Buenos Aires so is ideal for a restful escape. If you can afford it stay in one of the nearby luxury *estancias*, but we opted for the budget alternative—staying in a cheap hotel and visiting *Estancia Cinacina*, just a 15 minute walk away, for an exhilarating horse ride galloping across fields and through lakes.

San Antonio de Areco is a sleepy town with crumbling colonial buildings and antique shops that's perfect for exploring on foot or bicycle (free from the tourist office). The best places for spotting gauchos are by the river where you'll find them riding horses or in one of the town's old fashioned *pulperias* (traditional bars). Our favourite is *La Esquina de Merti* on the pretty cobblestoned main square Plaza Ruiz de Arellano. It's a great place for a drink and the gaucho paraphernalia lining the walls isn't there for tourists - it's a favourite hangout for beret-wearing gauchos.

Read more about San Antonio de Areco:

🌿 **Exploring Argentina's Gaucho Country**



Horse riding in San Antonio de Areco

Iguazu Falls

Peer into the Devil's Throat

As we said in the Brazil section Iguazu Falls was a tourist attraction that lived up to expectations. We stayed in the small town of Puerto Iguazu and spent a day on the Brazilian side of the waterfall and a day on the Argentine side. They are different experiences and it's well worth visiting both. There is more to see on the Argentine side as a network of trails snake through the jungle leading to different viewpoints of the 275 waterfalls that make up Iguazu Falls. We got to the park early and had the peaceful upper and lower trail circuits to ourselves.

Travel Tip: Take the *super cama* (also called *tutto letto*) overnight bus from Buenos Aires for the most comfortable 17 hour bus trip you'll ever experience. We went with Via Bariloche and enjoyed fully reclining seats, personal TV screens playing quality films, and meals, wine, champagne and whisky served at your seat. It's the only bus journey we've taken that we didn't want to end.

The highlight is the *Garganta del Diablo* (Devil's Throat) where you peer from a platform into the thunderous volume of water that the main waterfall produces. The falls are so forceful that there's a permanent ferocious roar and a 100 foot cloud of spray - you will get wet! It's an incredible sight and we had the fortune to visit Iguazu during the full moon so we took advantage of the once a month opportunity to visit the *Garganta del Diablo* again at night. Seeing the falls glowing in the moonlight was magical.

Read more about Iguazu Falls:

🐍 **The Mighty Iguazu Falls**



Salta

A relaxed city where modern meets traditional

We passed through Salta in Northwest Argentina on our way to Bolivia and although we hadn't planned to stay for long, we ended up spending two months in this relaxed city. We loved its beautiful colonial buildings, leafy central plaza, carefree, laid back atmosphere, bustling produce market, mountain views, listening to local folk music at the *peña La Casona del Molino*, and the frequent occurrence of watching hundreds of gauchos riding into the city for one festival or another.

Salta isn't perfectly preserved or overly touristy. A traveller might see all the attractions in a few days but for us it was a good spot to live for a while and experience Argentine life outside of the capital.

Read more about Salta:



Salta Highlights

Road Trip Northwest Argentina

Canyons, cacti and colourful mountains

Quebrada de Cafayate



Salta is the starting point for one of the best road trips we have ever taken through red rock canyons, past giant cacti, multi-hued mountains, pre-Incan ruins and with a stop at the vineyards of Cafayate. We loved having the freedom of a car to explore the quiet roads past dusty villages and gauchos on their horses.

The basic route is from Salta to Cafayate to Cachi and back to Salta but you can also make worthwhile side trips to the salt flats and north of Salta to the Cerro de Siete Colores (Hill of Seven Colours) at Purmamarca, the Incan fortress of Tilcara and beyond to Humahuaca. Three days is the minimum amount of time needed but a week is much better.

Read more about Northwest Argentina:

🌀 [**Road Trippin'—Northwest Argentina Part 1**](#)

🌀 [**Road Trippin'—Northwest Argentina Part 2**](#)

Cafayate

Quality wine and stunning views

We highly recommend visiting Cafayate as part of a road trip from Salta, but if that's not possible then Cafayate is still definitely worth a visit. Most people think of Mendoza when they think of Argentine wine but Cafayate is a smaller, lesser known alternative to sample wine at its source. It's a wonderfully laid back, sunny town surrounded by red rock mountains and vineyards. Cafayate's compact size means it's easy to reach many of the *bodegas* for wine tastings on foot or bicycle (pick up a map at the tourist office).



Nanni Bodega, Cafayate

If you drink up an appetite don't miss *La Casa de las Empanadas* where you can sample gourmet versions of Argentina's classic pastry. We loved the *Vegetariana* filled with squash, aubergine, goats cheese and the local torrontes white wine. To finish your grape themed meal head to *Heladería Miranda* for some torrontes or cabernet ice cream.

It's also worth making a half day trip to Quilmes. These indigenous, pre-Incan ruins set into a mountain feel like they are in the middle of nowhere and only a few tourists make it out here. Like many archaeological sites, a series of low stone walls is all that is left of the citadel but the setting

Hotel Tip: For a splurge head to **Altalaluna**, a boutique hotel just outside of Tolombon 14 km from Cafayate. It's a beautiful Spanish style building set on a vineyard with wonderful views of the surrounding mountains. There's a pool, spa, comfy lounge area with open fire (and WiFi) and large gardens. Our spacious room had its own balcony overlooking the vineyard with gorgeous sunset views. Best of all, it was utterly tranquil. We got a great off season rate so check out their special offers.

amongst the cacti is atmospheric and the views from the top of the hill are spectacular—you can see for miles into the vast desert landscape.

Read more about Cafayate:

🌿 **Road Trippin'—Northwest Argentina Part 1**



Mountains outside Cafayate

PARAGUAY

A photograph of a sunset over a landscape. The sky is a mix of orange, yellow, and blue. In the foreground, there are dark silhouettes of trees and foliage. A large tree branch hangs down from the top right corner. The overall mood is peaceful and scenic.

Very few travellers make it to Paraguay and that is part of its attraction. We only saw three other tourists in our three weeks in the country and we found the local people curious, welcoming and eager to talk to us (great for practising our Spanish). There aren't really any big attractions in Paraguay, which is probably the reason people don't visit, but instead we were pleasantly surprised by empty UNESCO World Heritage sites, charming small towns, unique local festivals, pretty rolling green countryside and a laid back atmosphere. Other than the Trinidad ruins we would say there are no must-sees and anywhere you visit will be an interesting experience.

Trinidad Jesuit Ruins

A UNESCO World Heritage site to yourself



The Jesuit ruins of Trinidad and Jesús are probably the country's most well known attractions. We visited Trinidad and it was our first experience of having a UNESCO World Heritage site entirely to ourselves. There isn't much information available but the red ruins of the Jesuit mission dating back to 1712 were atmospheric and the setting amongst the green, peaceful countryside is lovely. We enjoyed wandering around and climbing the bell tower as the sun began to set.

The best place to base yourself for a visit to the Jesuit ruins is Encarnacion, a pleasant if unexciting city. The ruins are one hour away on the road to Ciudad del Este.

San Ignacio

Small town Paraguay

San Ignacio is a small town located between Encarnacion and Asuncion. We stopped here to visit the Jesuit museum and to relax at the **San Ignacio Country Club**, a hotel that although not as fancy as it sounds is a tranquil place in the countryside with lots of facilities, home-cooked meals by the very friendly family who runs the place, and unusually - WiFi.

There's not much to see in San Ignacio town but it's pleasant to wander around and enjoy being the only tourists. The Jesuit museum is located in a beautiful old building and we got a private tour as the only visitors there. Religious artefacts aren't really our thing but, as at the Trinidad ruins, having the place to ourselves added to the attraction.



San Ignacio

San Juan Bautista

Fireball and other crazy local festivities

San Juan Bautista is another small town on the route between Encarnacion and Asuncion just an hour north of San Ignacio. There aren't any tourist sights but it's an attractive place to wander and meet the locals. We had an excellent first **couchsurfing experience** here and enjoyed some of the festivities during June's San Juan Festival—fire ball, football with a blazing ball, was a crazy highlight.



San Juan Bautista

Read more about Paraguay:



A Practical Guide to Paraguay Part 1



A Practical Guide to Paraguay Part 2

BOLIVIA

If we had to choose we'd pick Bolivia as our favourite country in South America. It was the most challenging place we visited with some very rough bus rides, but it was also the most culturally interesting with a prominent indigenous culture, and some incredible landscapes from the tropical rainforest of the Amazon region to the dizzying heights of the *altiplano*. As a bonus it is also the cheapest country on the continent.



Arbol de Piedra (Stone Tree), Southwest Bolivia

Tupiza surprised us. It was our first stop in Bolivia after crossing the border from northern Argentina and we were only there for a jeep tour to Uyuni, but we really enjoyed this relaxed town. Mountains of red rock rise above Tupiza, vibrant market stalls manned by traditionally dressed women sell freshly squeezed orange juice for \$0.50 and wandering around the dusty streets is interesting for a day.

The highlight is undoubtedly getting out to explore the incredible Wild West scenery of the surrounding area, ideally on horseback. For only \$10 we spent three hours galloping under a deep blue sky past red mountains, giant cacti, ravines, canyons and crazy rock formations.



Horse riding outside Tupiza

Tupiza is the perfect place to start a jeep tour to the famous Salar de Uyuni salt flats. You can visit them from Uyuni but the tour operators in Tupiza are more professional and on the way you get to see even more of this area's amazing landscapes.

Read more about Tupiza:

🐾 **Tupiza, Bolivia: Horse Riding in the Wild West**

Southwest Circuit and Salt Flats Tour

Lunar landscapes and giant salt flats

The giant salt flats of the Salar de Uyuni are a highlight for many visitors to Bolivia, reached by a jeep tour from Uyuni. We took an alternative route from Tupiza to Uyuni where over four days and 1000km we saw a mind-blowing array of other-worldly landscapes, all between 4000 and 5000 metres above sea level.

Southwest Bolivia is a harsh, almost uninhabited region with some of the wildest, most remote and stunning scenery we have ever experienced. We passed blue, green, red and white mineral lakes; multi-hued volcanoes; vast desert; llamas, vicuñas, and flamingos; and of course the famous, immense Salar de Uyuni: the world's largest salt flats.

The journey isn't easy—temperatures drop below freezing and you stay in very basic shared accommodation without heating or showers. You spend up to 11 hours a day in the jeep along bumpy, rocky, rough roads. But it's absolutely worth it for the opportunity to see such an incredible part of the world.



Isla Incahuasi, Salar de Uyuni

Read more about the Salt Flats tour:

🐪 **[Bolivia's Salt Flats: One Wild Ride The Wrong Way Round Part 1](#)**

🐪 **[Bolivia's Salt Flats: One Wild Ride The Wrong Way Round Part 2](#)**



Laguna Colorada

Sucre

The most liveable city in Bolivia

We fell for Sucre's sunny climate, historic architecture, cobbled streets, vibrant market, youthful vibe and friendly people. Terracotta roofs and white colonial buildings made us feel like we were in Spain until we discovered pockets of Bolivia. Women in voluminous, colourful skirts and long plaits serve fresh orange juice from street carts; young working children sell their version of the Big Issue; and pirate DVDs are sold on the chaotic streets around the central market. It's a compact city that's easy to get around on foot and it's my favourite destination to take Spanish classes.

Read more about Sucre:

- 🌀 [Our Guide to Sucre, Bolivia](#)
- 🌀 [Sucre Spanish School Review](#)
- 🌀 [An Off The Beaten Track Tour of Sucre Restaurants](#)



Simon with monkeys at Zoo El
Refugio, Samaipata



Samaipata

Ruins, waterfalls and wildlife in the mountains

Samaipata is a relaxed village in the mountains a few hours from Santa Cruz. Most travellers don't include it on their itineraries but it's a lovely place to chill out for a while and enjoy hikes, trips to waterfalls and archaeological sites, and get up close to monkeys at the *Zoo El Refugio*—they took a liking to Simon and he ended up with one on his head! We also rented horses from this wildlife refuge and loved heading off on our own to explore the countryside.

Read more about Samaipata:

🐾 **Bolivian Bus Hell: An Illustrated Guide**

Hotel Tip: We loved **La Posada del Sol**. The friendly owners picked us up at 5am from our overnight bus and let us sleep in an empty room until ours was ready - just what we needed. The breakfast burritos are delicious, the mountain views are beautiful, there's a garden to relax in and a comfy lounge to curl up with a book or watch one of their many DVDs.

Amazon Rainforest

Get up close to alligators, monkeys and capybara

Visiting the Amazon Rainforest was one of the few “must-do”s on our South American travels, and while most people think of Brazil when planning an Amazon visit, the Amazon basin also extends to Peru, Colombia, Ecuador and Bolivia. Due to Brazil’s expense and continued deforestation we heard that Bolivia was an excellent alternative. Not only is it much cheaper and just as biologically diverse, there is no risk of malaria in the jungle around Rurrenabaque—the main starting point for trips.

From Rurrenabaque you have two choices: the *selva* (jungle) for the classic Amazon experience, or the *pampas*, a wetland savannah area where the lack of trees means it’s much easier to spot wildlife. We went on both trips and enjoyed them both. The cheap *pampas* trips are basic and often badly run, but the canoe trip out to the camp is incredible—alligators, squirrel monkeys, turtles and the giant rodents capybara were all very easy to see along the banks of the river.



Squirrel monkey on Pampas canoe ride

We stayed in an eco-lodge for the jungle section of the trip which was much more professionally run and we had a very comfortable cabana, but it was three times the price of a *pampas* trip and spotting wildlife was difficult. For us it was worth it for the experience of being deep in the jungle and enjoying the unique sounds, smells and sights of the Amazon Rainforest.

Read more about the Bolivian Amazon:

🐾 **The Bolivian Amazon: The Jungle vs The** *Pampas*



Capybara on Pampas canoe ride

La Paz

Indigenous culture and dizzying views

We'd heard mixed things about the high altitude capital of La Paz and hadn't expected to like it, but maybe it was the low expectations that led to us enjoying our visit. There's a vibrant street scene with markets and food stalls lining the roads; indigenous women in bowler hats carrying babies in colourful shawls on their backs; beautiful colonial architecture and an impressive location within a canyon, surrounded by snowy peaks. Be prepared for cold weather, especially at night, and take it easy on the steep streets at an altitude of nearly 4000 metres.



Dancers in La Paz parade

PERU We didn't do any of the things you are supposed to do in Peru: we didn't walk the Inca Trail, spot condors at Colca Canyon, go sand boarding in Huacachina, or fly over the Nazca lines. And we didn't end up doing what we really wanted to do: explore the less visited northern region and take a slow boat into the Amazon. It was a combination of exhaustion after Bolivia, illness and too much work, but despite this we still had some interesting and unexpected experiences in Peru.



Llamas at Machu Picchu

Cusco

The ancient capital of the Incan empire

Cusco is the most touristy place in South America but the ancient Incan city is truly gorgeous and it's easy to escape the tour groups by wandering aimlessly along cobblestone alleyways into hidden plazas. There are plenty of churches, ruins and museums to explore but even without visiting these you'll find history at every turn. Our favourite area was the hilltop neighbourhood of San Blas with its narrow cobbled lanes, crumbling white buildings, cool cafes and beautiful views of the city's terracotta roofs and surrounding mountains. Of course, Cusco is also the starting point for trips to Machu Picchu.

Read more about Cusco:

🌀 **Wandering and Eating in Cusco**

Food Tip: Don't miss the Coca Shop in *San Blas* where you can sample a range of unusual chocolates including coca, chilli, cinnamon, *maca* (an Andean plant) and *lúcuma* (a Peruvian fruit).



View from San Blas, Cusco

Machu Picchu

The Lost City of the Incas

Machu Picchu view from Wayna Picchu

Machu Picchu needs no introduction—almost every visitor to Peru aims to visit the mountain-top Incan ruin, either by walking the Inca Trail or taking the touristy train to Aguas Calientes, the nearest town. We were a little cynical about the whole experience as prices were high for Peru, whichever option you went with (we took the train), but it is a beautiful place with an incredible setting amongst lush green mountains. It is worth getting there for the 6am opening time so you can experience the ruins without so many people around (it's still busy though) and have a chance to get one of the limited spots to climb Wayna Picchu. The steep hike was a highlight for us as it wasn't difficult to find a quiet spot on the way up to sit and enjoy the views of the Incan citadel from above.

Travel Tip: The classic Inca Trail to Machu Picchu gets booked up months in advance so consider an alternative route such as the Salkantay trek. If you don't feel like trekking you could take the bus or shared taxi from Cusco to Ollantaytambo in the Sacred Valley and the train from there as it'll be cheaper than taking the train from Cusco direct to Aguas Calientes.



Arequipa

La Ciudad Blanca (White City)

Arequipa is an attractive city of white stone surrounded by three volcanoes in southern Peru. The Spanish colonial architecture of the historic centre and the leafy central plaza are beautiful. The highlight for us was the Santa Catalina Monastery. The huge convent is over 400 years old and is a city within a city. High walls were built to protect the nuns from the outside world and inside we found a wonderful maze of narrow streets, colourful buildings, pretty plazas and bright flowers. You can also poke around the nuns' old cells. Despite being Arequipa's biggest tourist attraction it's easy to find a quiet hidden corner or sunny plaza to yourself. The garden cafe is also a chilled out place with good sandwiches and cakes.



Santa Catalina Monastery, Arequipa

Lima

The city it takes time to love

We had a love/hate relationship with the bustling capital Lima. We hated the traffic, high prices and constant cloud, but we loved the food, parks along the seafront and the *Circuito Mágico del Agua* (Magic Circuit of Water). We have never seen anything like this park full of different water fountains of all sizes and shapes. It's only open at night to take advantage of the multi-coloured light displays which add to the magic. The park was full of Peruvian families and teenage couples, but very few tourists. It felt like public art at its best: accessible, interactive (yes, you can get wet) and unique. The huge Fantasía display with projections of dancing couples onto the water synced with a music and light show was impressive but felt a little more Disney than art!

Read more about Lima:

🌿 **Alma Zen Review: Gourmet Vegetarian Food in Lima**

Restaurant Tip: Peru, like all of South America is not very vegetarian friendly so discovering Alma-Zen was a very welcome relief. The food served at this friendly vegetarian cafe is organic, inventive and utterly delicious. We loved having the opportunity to try vegetarian versions of Peruvian seafood classics such as avocado and mango ceviche and vegetarian causa. The high prices are worth it for a creative gourmet treat.



Circuito Mágico del Agua, Lima

Rural Andes near Huaraz

Quechua culture and snowy peaks

Our most unique experience in Peru was having the opportunity to live in a very rural Andean community 10km outside of Huaraz where we volunteered to build a website for the NGO **An-dean Alliance**. The community can barely be called a village—just a scattering of adobe huts amongst fields of crops, cows, sheep, goats and chickens. There is no public transport or shops and the “road” is just a steep, muddy track.



Feast to celebrate new school in rural Andes

It felt isolated (the trip into Huaraz was quite a mission) but we loved the snowy views of the Cordillera Blanca; the friendly locals; walking past women in colourful traditional dress herding sheep; and getting invited to local events like the inauguration of the new (and only) pre-school for a feast of guinea pigs and potatoes.

Even if you don't volunteer like we did, Huaraz is an unexciting town but a great base to hike or climb in the Cordillera Blanca where there are 20 peaks over 6000 metres.

Read more about Huaraz:

☞ **Lazy Dog Inn—A Mountain Retreat in Peru**

COLOMBIA

Colombia has been off bounds to travellers for many years but it is now safe to travel there and it has become increasingly popular in the last few years. Visitors are attracted to the friendly people, vibrant nightlife, lush green highlands and relaxed Caribbean beach towns. We spent two months living in Medellin and a few weeks travelling around the country, and for us the highlight was the sleepy, pretty *pueblos* (villages) of the coffee region. Oh, and the diverse range of **delicious tropical fruit** including many varieties we'd never heard of before.

Main Plaza, Jardin

Medellin

The most liveable city in Colombia

Medellin has become a popular base for digital nomads and expats in recent years. It's probably the most liveable city in Colombia with a spring-like climate year round, views of the surrounding hills, modern infrastructure and lively nightlife. One of our favourite free things to do in Medellin is wander around Plaza Botero in the centre of the city and admire the bulbous sculptures by local artist Fernando Botero. He is famous for his paintings and sculptures of fat people and there are plenty to see here.



Medellin is a good base to visit some of the surrounding *pueblos*. We took a two hour trip to Guatapé, a pretty village of narrow streets and houses decorated with colourful 3D designs. You can also climb La Piedra del Peñol for stunning views of an extensive reservoir full of tiny islands.

Read more about Medellin:

👉 [**Exploring Botero's Fat Sculptures in Medellin**](#)

👉 [**Christmas in Medellin**](#)

Jardín

Off the beaten track in a sleepy *pueblo*

The small *pueblo* Jardín in the hills a few hours from Medellin was our favourite place in Colombia, and surprisingly you won't find it in the guidebooks. In fact we were the only gringos in town, although Colombians from Medellin often visit for a rural weekend getaway. We loved the colourful colonial buildings, warm climate, backdrop of lush green hills, friendly people, sociable plaza lined with cafes, low prices, and the horses and carts that roam the streets. On Saturday nights locals ride their horses to the main square and parade around, showing off and stopping outside one of the bars for a drink and chat.

Jardín isn't the place to come for action-packed adventure, it's more about soaking up the wonderfully slow pace of life and chatting to locals. There are a couple of interesting trips though. We enjoyed the treacherous but exciting mountainside horse ride to *La Cueva del Esplendor*



Cafes in Jardín's Plaza

to visit a waterfall within a cave, and the *teleferico* (cable car) trip for views over the town and the surrounding green mountains, coffee and banana plantations.

Read more about *Jardín*:

🌀 **Jardín, Colombia: The Traveller's Holy Grail**



Salento

Giant wax palms and coffee plantations

Like *Jardín*, Salento is another gorgeous *pueblo* in Colombia's coffee region. It sees more tourists though as many people come to hike through the impressive giant wax palms in the *Valle de Cocora*. You can also go horse riding, visit a coffee plantation or just relax and enjoy the beautiful countryside views. The perfect place to take a break and chill out for a while.

Hotel Tip: **La Serrana Eco Farm and Hostel** is located out in the countryside with beautiful views, but only a 15 minute walk from the main plaza. There are attractive private rooms and dorms, and a sociable living area with comfy couches, hammocks, lots of DVDs, kitchen and free WiFi.



Valle de Cocora, Salento



Old Town, Cartagena

Cartagena

Colourful colonial city on the Caribbean coast

Cartagena is Colombia's most popular tourist destination and feels a world away from the highlands around Medellin and the coffee region. It's located on the Caribbean coast with sweltering temperatures and a gorgeous walled old town with colonial buildings in shades of ochre. We loved the vibrant street life with many fruit vendors and wandering around the cobblestoned plazas - Plaza Fernandez de Madrid and Plaza San Diego were our favourites as they were quieter and had less touts than the more popular Plaza Santo Domingo.

SOUTH AMERICA TRAVEL TIPS

Travel Costs

To help you with your planning here are our South America travel costs. This is what we spent on average per person, per day for each country:

Bolivia: £12 (\$19) a day for basic expenses (accommodation, food, transport, entertainment), plus an extra £478 (\$742) for salt flats and Amazon tours, flights to the Amazon region and Spanish lessons.

Peru: £17 (\$26) a day for basic expenses, plus £98 (\$152) for transport and entrance to Machu Picchu.

Paraguay: £18 (\$28) a day for basic expenses.

Argentina: £18 (\$28) a day for basic expenses, plus £385 (\$598) for six weeks of Spanish lessons.

Colombia: £21 (\$33) a day for basic expenses, plus £87 (\$135) for 10 hours of private Spanish lessons.

Brazil: £40 (\$62) a day for basic expenses, plus £179 (\$278) for a flight from Rio to Buenos Aires.

This is what we spent (per person) and should only be taken as a guideline as everyone travels differently and costs depend on how quickly you travel, how many tours and activities you do and what your comfort level is.

We found we saved money when we travelled slowly, rented an apartment for a month or two and cooked our own food. For full details see our budget breakdowns for **Brazil, Argentina and Paraguay**, and **Bolivia and Peru**. Track your travel expenses with our iOS app **Trail Wallet**.



Our apartment in Buenos Aires cost the same as a hostel

Transport

Flights within South America are expensive as there are no budget airlines like in other parts of the world, and there are very few train lines, so it is likely that you'll be travelling mostly by bus. Don't underestimate the distances in South America and try to plan too much as taking too many overnight bus trips is exhausting.

The quality of the buses and road conditions vary widely. In **Brazil** and **Argentina** we travelled on the most spacious, comfortable buses we have ever experienced. The *super cama* class of bus in **Argentina** is like business class on a plane with almost fully reclining seats, personal TV screens, and meals and alcohol served at your seat. Via Bariloche is a particularly good bus company.

Peru also has a number of luxury bus lines, and although they aren't up to Argentina's standards the cama class on the bus companies Cruz del Sur & Movil Tours is comfortable. As most trips in Peru are overnight we thought the extra expense was worth it for a better nights sleep.

Bolivia is a different story. There are very few tarmacked roads so most trips are very bumpy, and the buses are usually old and decrepit. Sometimes flying can be worthwhile, especially to reach the Amazon region.

We use **Kiwi** and **Skyscanner** to search for the cheapest flights.



Flying out of the Bolivian Amazon

Safety

We never felt unsafe in South America, and our only problem was a semi-mugging in Rio, but we didn't lose anything—**read the full story**. However theft does occur, especially on buses. Be careful, but don't be paranoid. Here are some tips for keeping your belongings safe in South America:

- ☞ Don't keep your bags in the overhead compartments on buses and be aware of your bags by your feet as they could get stolen, or slashed and the contents removed.
- ☞ Wear a money belt containing your passport, credit cards and most of your cash when travelling between destinations.
- ☞ Only carry a small amount of cash and one credit/debit card in your wallet. Always have back up cards stored in your money belt.
- ☞ Choose a side opening backpack that is lockable with a small combination lock.
- ☞ Leave your valuables locked inside your backpack in your hotel room and attach the backpack to a secure piece of furniture using a light cable lock.
- ☞ Make sure you buy travel insurance. We recommend **True Traveller** (UK/EU citizens) and **World Nomads** (worldwide).

We carried our passports, credit cards and most of our cash in money belts when we were travelling between destinations. We travelled with carry-on size backpacks which enabled us to keep our bags with us on buses. To see exactly what we packed for South America take a look at **our packing list**. My book, **The Carry-On Traveller: The Ultimate Guide to Packing Light**, teaches you how to travel with just carry-on luggage for any trip.



Learning Spanish

Spanish is spoken all over South America except for Brazil (where they speak Portuguese) so travelling here is an excellent opportunity to learn a new language and have plenty of opportunities to practice. Knowing the basics is essential if you want to travel anywhere outside of the big tourist destinations, as this isn't like Southeast Asia where many people speak English.

Luckily Spanish isn't too difficult to learn and there are plenty of opportunities to study it on the continent. We would highly recommend starting your trip with at least a few weeks of lessons. We took both group classes and private lessons and found we learnt a lot quicker with the one-to-one sessions.

We studied Spanish in a number of locations and would most recommend **Sucre**, Bolivia for low prices and a clear spoken Spanish, and **Buenos Aires**, Argentina as it's an amazing city to spend some time, and although the accent and grammar differ from the rest of the continent we didn't find it too challenging.



Simon (far right) with his Spanish class in Buenos Aires

Vegetarian Food

Being vegetarian in South America was not easy. We could always find something to eat but it wasn't always very tasty or healthy, and we often missed out on trying local dishes and were forced to eat in more expensive tourist restaurants instead. Often it is best to cook for yourself when you have the opportunity. Learning some Spanish to explain your dietary requirements is essential as what the term "vegetariano" actually means is not always understood.

Buenos Aires was the best destination for vegetarians with some wonderful vegetarian-friendly restaurants, but you'll have to hunt them out. Argentina as a whole is probably the easiest country to travel in as empanadas, pizza and pasta are common, but it won't be the healthiest of diets. See our guide to the **Best Vegetarian Restaurants in Buenos Aires**.

We have written a series of Vegetarian Survival Guides sharing our tips for vegetarians in each country we visited, including which local dishes are meat-free. See our vegetarian guides to **Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay, Bolivia,** and **Peru**.



Vegetarian ceviche at Alma Zen restaurant, Lima

Thanks For Reading

We hope you've enjoyed *South America Highlights* and now have some ideas to plan your own trip to South America.

We'd love to hear what you think of this book and what your own South America highlights are—you can **leave a comment here** or email us at **sianderin@neverendingvoyage.com**. Also, please feel free to contact us if you have any questions about South America—we'd be happy to help.

If you enjoyed *South America Highlights* we'd really appreciate it if you could help us spread the word about this free guide by promoting it on Twitter, Facebook, StumbleUpon or your favourite social network. People can sign up to our mailing list to receive their free copy **here**.

Finally, we'd love to hear from you! If you would like to connect with us you can:

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- ☞ Add **Erin** or **Never Ending Voyage** to your Google Plus circles.

Thanks for reading,

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