

Hotel La Passion



new world order

Malachy O'Neill shares his top ten South American retreats. If travel wasn't a plan, it should be now...

Hotel La Passion

Wandering around the Columbian city of Cartagena you could easily imagine yourself in a Gabriel García Márquez novel. It's also the city in which you'll find a greater concentration of high quality boutique hotels than anywhere else in Latin America. The best of them is Hotel La Passion. Set in an 18th century Spanish villa, it exudes effortless sophistication and understated personal service.

High ceilings and large windows ensure an abundance of light and space. Other positives include the rooftop infinity pool with its panoramic views over the city, and the roomy bedrooms, some of which offer enormous bathtubs in full of view of the king-size bed. No surprise then, that concierge.com recently recognised La Passion as one of the world's best hotels for conducting an affair!

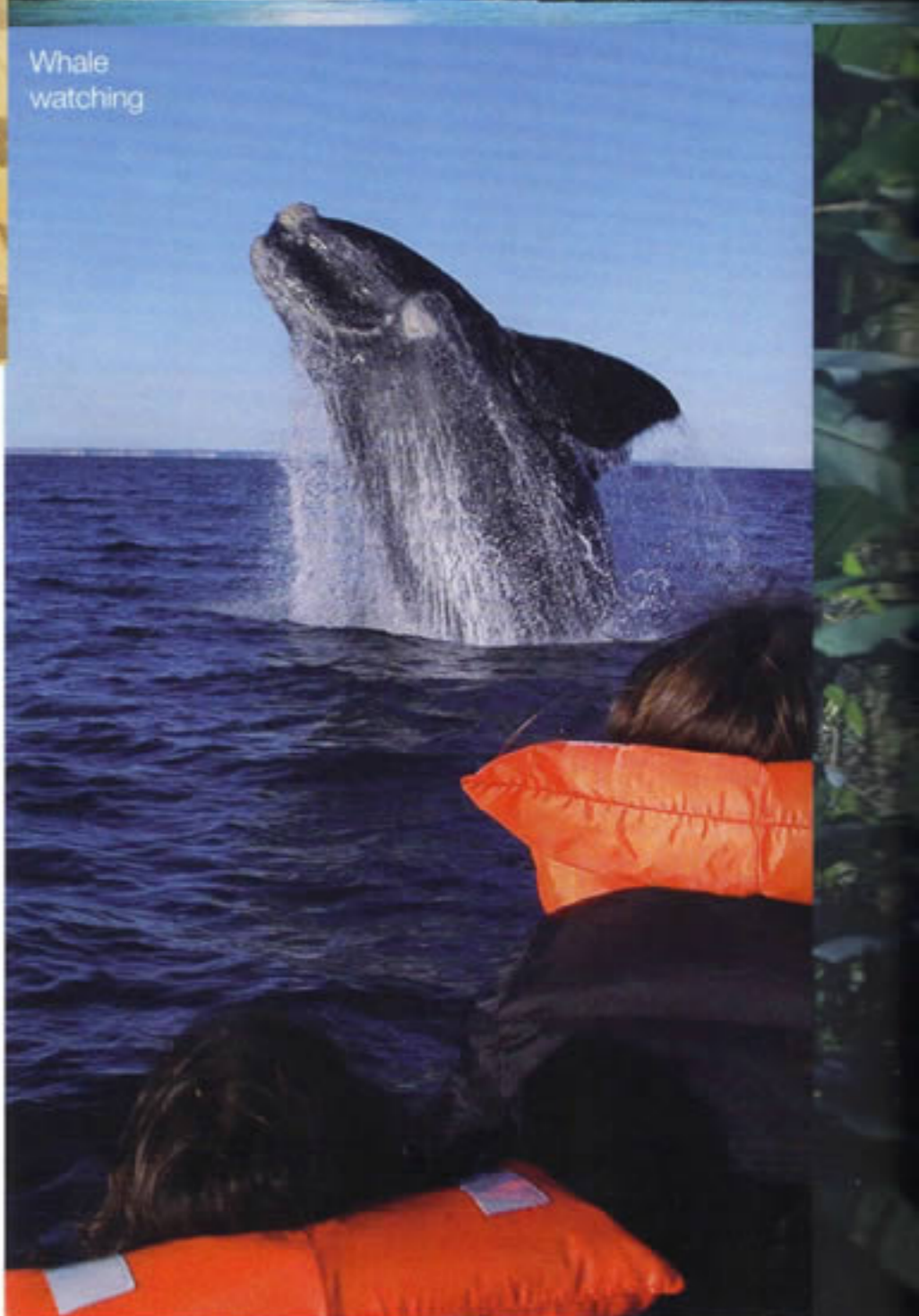
Cartagena, Colombia. Tel: +57 5664 8605; lapassionhotel.com



Awasi



Explora en Patagonia



Whale watching



Awasi

The unearthly Atacama desert is the driest place in the world, and with its psychedelic mineral lakes, prehistoric trees and bubbling geysers, it's become a major hit with tourists over recent years. All the more reason to head for the local town of San Pedro and Awasi, its most intimate and exclusive hotel.

In Quechua, the language of the Incas, Awasi means home, and the hotel's eight thatched adobe cottages are as cosy and as private as you could want. In the middle of them a communal patio with a bar and open fire provides a welcoming spot for a drink with the other guests and a delicious, distinctive dinner – Awasi's menu puts a modern spin on traditional local recipes.

The tailor-made ethos is central to the hotel; your private guide will bring you to some of the lesser-visited local attractions, giving exceptional insights into this surreal and captivating part of the world.

San Pedro de Atacama, Chile. Tel: +56 2233 9641; awasi.cl

Explora en Patagonia

Designated a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1978, the Torres del Paine National Park's granite peaks, glaciers, lakes and waterfalls make for some monumental views. The Explora en Patagonia's pioneering architecture enjoys a privileged position right amongst them on the shores of Lake Pehoé, and is now firmly established as one of Latin America's best known and most sought after hotels.

Nowhere else strikes the balance between luxury and activity with quite so much flair. In terms of style and service, every detail has been thought through, from food and drink, to the bed linen, and the furniture hand-crafted from local materials.

As you might guess, the hotel's concept is based around exploration, and its team of highly qualified guides will ensure that you get the most out of your stay. Each evening you'll sit down and discuss the next day's activities, depending on the weather and what you feel like doing. Everything is included in the hotel's fixed four day package, and whether you hanker for adventure or idleness, the Explora en Patagonia will cater to your every whim.

Torres del Paine National Park, Chile. Tel: +56 2206 6060; explora.com



Fazenda Barranco
Alto Eco Lodge

Fazenda Barranco Alto Eco Lodge

The Pantanal is the name given to Southern Brazil's tropical wetlands. Few places in South America can boast such a jaw-dropping diversity of animal species. From caimans to capybaras, macaws to maned wolves, giant otters to anacondas, here are safari opportunities every bit as impressive as in Africa, but where the creatures verge on the macabre side of things.

Fazenda Barranco Alto stands head and shoulders above the other rural lodges in the area. Both a working cattle ranch and a family home, it only has four rooms, so hospitality is highly personalised and activities are tailored to your own interests. Choose from jeep, boat and horseback safaris, birdwatching, canoeing, hiking, fishing and astronomy – hundreds of miles from any town, the starry skies are spectacular! Food is mostly home-grown, abundant and delicious, while the quality of the service and guiding are second to none.

Southern Pantanal, Brazil. Tel: +55 679 654 3383; fazendabarrancoalto.com.br

El Pedral Lodge

Jutting out from the Patagonian steppe into the Atlantic is the Valdes Peninsula, a thumbnail-shaped promontory frequented by some of the world's most fascinating species. Penguins, whales, elephant seals and sealions all come here to breed, and at El Pedral you can enjoy unrivalled access to them.

The lodge, which was built in the 19th century in a charming but rather incongruous mock-Norman style, is situated on the mainland just to the south of the Peninsula. This makes for a perfect vantage point, and an ideal base from which to sail out amongst the whales, and watch the sun set against the rocky beaches and towering cliffs.

Punta Ninfas, Argentina. Tel: +54 114 311 1919; elpedrallodge.com



Inkaterra

Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel

Formerly known as The Pueblo, this is the *only* place to stay when you're visiting the famous lost city of the Incas. While the luxurious Sanctuary Lodge hotel is situated right beside the ruined citadel, you'll find a lot more tranquility and better value half an hour downhill at the Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel.

Set at the edge of the busy tourist town of Aguas Calientes, the hotel is a somewhat sprawling 'village' style complex of eighty-five whitewashed casitas. There are orchid gardens and ecological trails, as well as some of the best spa facilities in Peru. If you want to get well away from the tourist bustle of Machu Picchu it's worth considering the VIP villas. Be prepared to splash out though...

Aguas Calientes, Peru. Tel: +51 84 245 314; inkaterra.com

Ponta dos Ganchos

Without question one of Brazil's most luxurious boutique hotels, and the perfect choice for people who like their beach holidays to involve plenty of pampering. Located on a private peninsula, the twenty five cabins of Ponta dos Ganchos are set in picture-



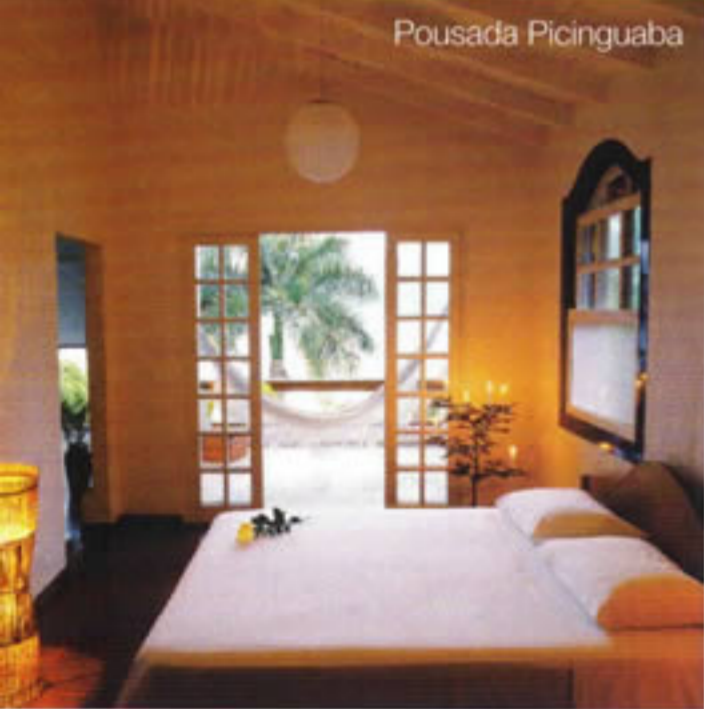
Ponta dos Ganchos



Estancia Huechahue



Boating excursions, as arranged at MV Aqua



Pousada Picinguaba

postcard surroundings, between azure seas and emerald forests. Food is unashamedly sophisticated, and served at any time of day. Other amenities include an indoor pool, tennis, volleyball, canoeing, scuba diving and a private cinema. There's even a private island that can be reserved for an exclusive dinner à deux. An ideal option for honeymooners. The local airport in Florianopolis, twenty five miles away, has regular connections to Rio, São Paulo and Buenos Aires,

making a stay at Ponta dos Ganchos very easy to incorporate into almost any South America itinerary.

Florianopolis, Brazil. Tel: +55 483 262 5000; pontadosganchos.com.br

Estancia Huechahue

Quite simply, there's nowhere like Huechahue. A 15,000 acre cattle ranch set where the Patagonian landscape sweeps up to meet the Andean lake district, it offers an unforgettable taste of frontier living. Englishwoman Jane Williams, who married into an Argentine family and pioneered the concept of estancia tourism, still runs the farm. Accommodation is not luxurious, but extremely cosy and cuisine is traditional, meaning there'll be no shortage of excellent home-reared beef and red wine. Best of all though is the surrounding countryside, and there's no better way

to explore it than in the saddle. Huechahue is unbeatable for the quality of its horses and riding. Regardless of your experience (or lack of it), you'll soon be taking off with the gauchos, trekking past ancient Indian burial caves, condors' nests, volcanoes and trout streams.

Junin de los Andes, Argentina; email: info@huechahue; huechahue.com

MV Aqua

The first luxury cruise on the Peruvian Amazon, the MV Aqua offers departures of three, four or seven nights into remote and untouched jungle, the longer cruises taking you into the wildlife-rich Pacaya Samiria Reserve. Here you might see rare pink river dolphins, sloths, howler monkeys, hawks, herons, millions of butterflies and perhaps even a jaguar.

The MV Aqua offers twelve large air-conditioned suites, some of which can be connected for families, and four of which have 180° panoramic windows. On each day of the cruise you'll be offered a variety of two to three hour excursions in small skiffs, perfect for navigating narrow tributaries. Excursions include visits to indigenous villages, piranha fishing, and wildlife-spotting trips led by bilingual naturalist guides. Of course if you're in the mood for a lazy day there's nothing quite so relaxing as lying on deck soaking up the sun and listening to the sounds of the Amazon.

Peruvian Amazon. Tel: +51 65 601 053; aquaexpeditions.com,

Pousada Picinguaba

Halfway between Rio and São Paulo, tucked away in a bay on Brazil's green coast, you'll find this hidden gem. A colonial villa on the edge of a tiny fishing village, Pousada Picinguaba combines style, simplicity and magical natural beauty. It's hard to imagine that only a few hours' drive from these two vast cities you can be surrounded by unspoiled beaches, virgin tropical forests and turquoise waters.

With no television, air conditioning, web connection or mobile phone signal, Picinguaba is the perfect place to disconnect from the modern world. Once you arrive you can be as active or as lazy as you like. If you're curious to explore, your host Emmanuel will bring you in his schooner to the outlying islands in the bay, while a good idea for a day trip is the perfectly preserved colonial town of Paraty, half an hour up the road.

Vila Picinguaba, Brazil. Tel: +55 123 836 9105; picinguaba.com ■