

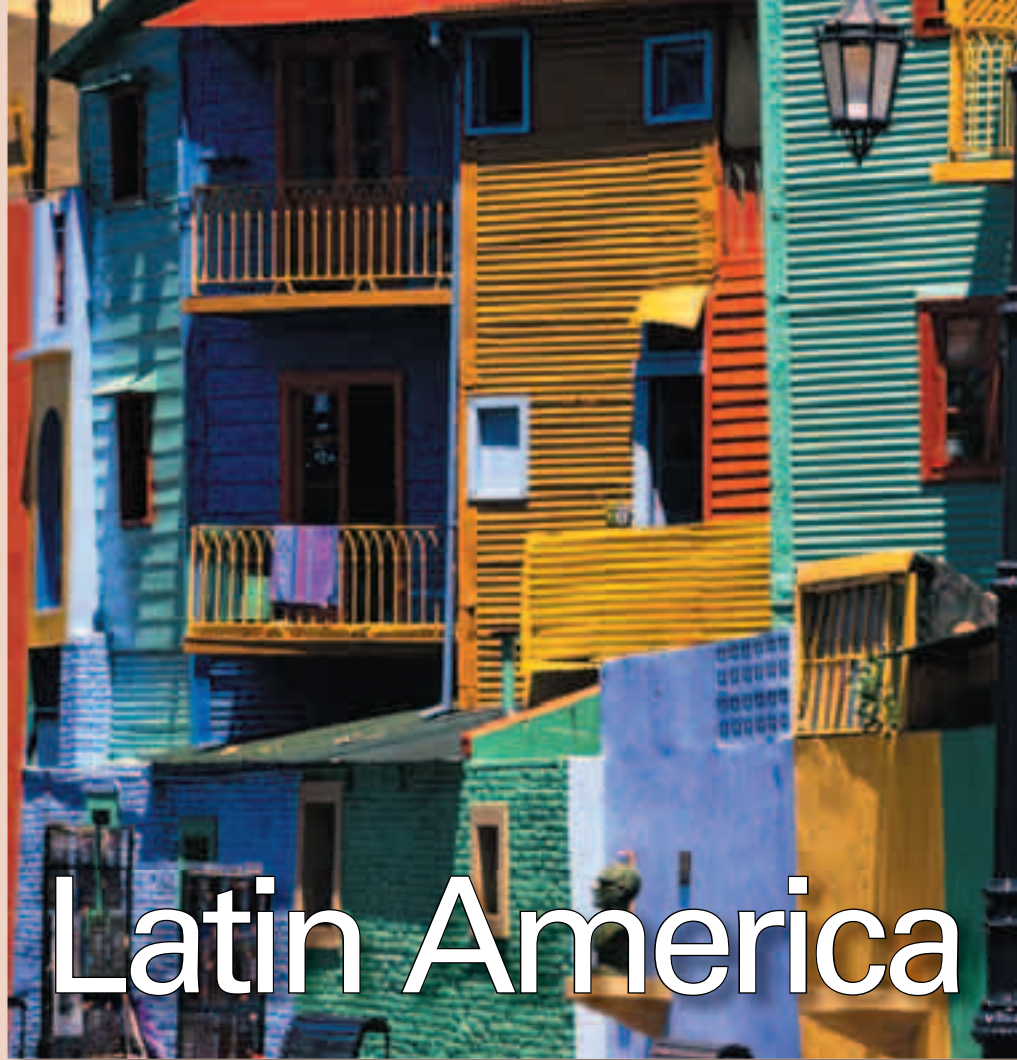
Mexico, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Peru and Argentina – all popular destinations for students wanting to learn Spanish in a part of the world like no other. Vast areas of unspoilt nature as well as a culture steeped in ancient traditions provide a unique language learning experience, as BETHAN NORRIS discovers.

For students from North America, Europe and Australasia, the Latin American continent promises a landscape and way of life that is somehow less tamed than their own countries and more exciting. This expectation has largely been created due to the continent's tropical rainforests, exotic natural flora and fauna, reminders of an ancient civilisation and vibrant modern-day culture.

Spanish language schools in the region have developed language teaching programmes that are specifically geared towards satisfying students' natural curiosity about the local people and landscape. "All the teachers and staff of the Costa Rican Language Academy (CRLA) are Costa Rican," relates Anabel Soto from the school, based in San José, Costa Rica. "In addition to [being] excellent instructors, they strive to provide a complete understanding of our customs and lifestyle."

CRLA offers daily Latin dance classes, weekly Costa Rican cooking lessons and an option for students to participate as a volunteer in local social and environmental development programmes. "You can work side by side with Costa Ricans in efforts that respond to different needs," confirms Soto. "We currently have opportunities available in national parks and reserves, children's services and care for the elderly."

In Peru, the country's rich local heritage provides an interesting backdrop to language learning in a more unusual study destination. For example, Sofia Balbuena from Centro de Intercambio Cultural Arequipa explains that Arequipa has been recognised by the United Nations as a World Cultural Heritage Site for its beautiful colonial homes, churches and monasteries constructed of a white volcanic stone. She says, "The countryside of Arequipa has been an inexhaustible source of inspiration for artists and poets [and] is a great chessboard in different degrees of green and with the Incan system of sowing in *andenerías* (terraces)."



Latin America

Many schools throughout Latin America specialise in offering language-plus courses, which combine learning Spanish with another activity, thereby ensuring that students really get to discover different aspects of the local life and history. At Amauta Spanish School in Cusco, Peru, courses include Spanish and Inca civilization, rafting, paragliding, weaving, music or volunteering in the local community. "Our school is located in Cusco, the former capital of the old Inca Empire," says Jose Berendse at the school. "It is a great place to spend some time studying and living as you will be completely immersed in local culture."

Berendse adds that previous students have been fortunate enough to be invited to visit Indian communities, or *pueblos*, where they have taken part in local ceremonies, such as baptisms and the *corte de pelo* (hair cut). "[During the *corte de pelo*] the whole community comes together and all the adults present have to cut one lock of hair of the child [and] after cutting they have to [give the child] something valuable, [such as] money, silver or also beer or other alcohol," says Berendse.

In Mexico, at Universidad Internacional's Spanish language school in Cuernavaca, students are encouraged to join the Programa Amigo and practise Spanish with new Mexican friends. There are also many trips to allow students to see places of interest, such as an excursion to Rio las Estacas, a natural spring river in the midst of a tropical jungle where scenes from the "Tarzan" films were filmed, or a trip to Teotihuacan Archeological site, which boasts magnificent pyramids dedicated to the sun and the moon.

Argentina is the second largest country in Latin America and, according to Daniel Korman from Argentina ILEE in

"Nuria, a student from Italy, was fanatical about soccer and one day her host family convinced her that she should go to the stadium with them to see the game between Saprissa [the local team known as 'The Monster'] and a team from the Catholic University in Chile. She therefore bought a t-shirt, a stuffed purple dragon – the team's mascot – a banner, cap – anything she could get her hands on. That night 'The Monster' lost 4-1 and as Nuria walked out of the stadium, a TV reporter tried to interview her in Spanish. She was so surprised that she was unable to utter a single word in Spanish, [even] though she was quite fluent. Her Costa Rican [friends] were able to make a DVD copy of the interview and mailed it to her."

Anabel Soto, Costa Rican Language Academy, San Jose, Costa Rica

Irazú Volcano National Park, Costa Rica

The beautiful views of and from Irazú volcano are worth the climb. Its Diego de la Haya crater contains a mineral-tinted lake that changes colour from green to red



PHOTOGRAPH: WWW.VISITCOSTARICA.COM



The famous La Boca neighbourhood in Buenos Aires, Argentina

Buenos Aires, the capital city is the most European of all cities in the region. "There is very little culture shock for students," he says. However, the city has its own appeal and offers surprises for those keen to explore. The Instituto de Espanol Rayuela is located in San Telmo, "one of the oldest and most beautiful areas in Buenos Aires", according to Alejandro Michel at the school, who adds that this "grass roots and bohemian area" of the city is often overlooked by visitors who stick to the more touristic areas of Buenos Aires.

"[Students] mostly like to sightsee, have coffee in traditional cafés, eat out in restaurants, visit museums, take tango lessons and go to *milongas* (tango balls), go to soccer matches and take pictures of political demonstrations [which have become a tourist attraction because there are so many]," says Michel.

One of the reasons why Buenos Aires may seem familiar to students from Europe is because of the many European influences in its architecture. Cecilia Behotegui de Manzo from Centro de Estudios de Lengua y Cultura in Quilmes, Buenos Aires, says that visitors are attracted from all over the world by the capital city's classical neighbourhoods. "San Telmo, with its Italian influence, Recoleta and Barrio Norte, with their French and aristocratic style, and the shopping areas of Palermo and Belgrano. Many streets recall those of Paris," she says.

The school organises city walking tours for all students on their language programmes and includes an architectural tour or an Eva Perón tour, which traces the life of one of Argentina's most famous icons. Other activities organised for students include kayaking on the



Agent viewpoint



"The most popular destinations in 2005 seem to be San José in Costa Rica, followed by Quito in Ecuador. Exploring a foreign country in combination with learning and having fun is one of the most attractive reasons for language travel. During the week our students can enjoy sports activities, films and theatre, cooking or dancing lessons and on the

weekend there are excursions to a volcano, a national park or into the jungle, depending on the destination they choose."

Petra Müller, iSt, Germany



"We have a lot of participants who have already studied Spanish in the Netherlands and they want to improve their level. The Spanish in Latin America is known to be rela-

tively easy to understand compared with the Spanish in Spain. Students immerse themselves in a completely different culture, which makes their stay quite adventurous. At the same time, the language schools offer them a 'safe home'."

Bernice Spijker, Activity International, Netherlands

"Peru has such an interesting history and rich culture. Machu Picchu



is an immense draw and most students include a trip there as part of their study package. Their one surprise, although we tell them repeatedly about it, is how cold the mountainous climates can be. Our students have found the Spanish language learning to be quite good and the local inhabitants very friendly."

Kay Rafool, Language Link, USA

Tigre delta, parachuting over Argentina's vast countryside and visits to traditional cattle ranches, known as *estancias*.

For a glimpse of some of Latin America's most fascinating treasures, students studying in Ecuador are well placed to explore the unique attractions of this continent. As Maria Clara de Wohlermann at Quito SI Spanish Institute points out, "Our strategic location in the middle of the world gives visitors the possibility of travelling

short distances from highlands with snow-capped mountains to the sandy beaches of the Pacific ocean." At Espiritu Santo University in Guayaquil, Ecuador, Johnny Gonzales says that a popular trip is to the symbolic equator line where students can stand with one foot in the northern hemisphere and one foot in the southern hemisphere. Students are also offered excursions to the Galapagos Islands, which are part of Ecuador's territory and a two-hour flight away.

Back in Ecuador, De Wohlermann paints a picture of intrepid adventure on offer, with rafting, climbing and horse back riding suggested, as well as the deliciously exquisite option of making chocolate from fresh cocoa in a nature reserve.

In Peru, unusual natural scenery is a draw for visitors and also provides opportunities for outdoor activities. Balbuena says that the Colca Canyon is a highlight for lovers of extreme adventure, as it is the deepest on earth, and [is] also "one of the best sceneries in the world for canoeing". She adds, "For hikers, they have the possibility to get to the snowy crater of the volcanoes Misti and Chachani [while] the Valley of the Volcanoes [has] more than 80 volcanoes in a magnificent landscape that looks like the moon."

Aerial view of Plaza de Armas, Cusco, Peru

This ancient square was called Huacaypata, or the Weeping Square, in Inca times. It is flanked by the cathedral, and many coffee shops with wooden balconies

