



## South American *demand* still strong, despite nature's latest obstacle

Machu Picchu (Image courtesy of BFirst Travel)

The strong Australian dollar is keeping demand for South America and Antarctica robust, despite the latest natural impediment – the ash cloud from Chile's Puyehue volcano causing some travel chaos.

By Gary Walsh

**W**HILE South America and the Antarctic are performing well – the latter riding on the back of the strong AUD – nature has put some impediments in the way in the past 18 months.

Last year saw a major earthquake in Chile and floods and landslides in Peru that closed the Inca Trail and saw the Machu Picchu archaeological site shut down at the peak of the tourism season.

This year a volcano in Chile named Puyehue has caused chaos to air travellers, especially in southern Australia and New Zealand. LAN, Chile's national carrier, has been forced to cancel services and re-route its trans-Pacific flights via Papeete in Tahiti to avoid the volcano's ash cloud.

The ash has also had some limited impact on bookings for South America, but Contours Travel director Ted Dziadkiewicz could see the lighter side: "The volcano has put some new

prospective reservations on hold – clients want to wait and see. We have had clients in the area who have been affected ... but Buenos Aires is not a bad place to be stuck in."

Ross Pulbrook from Inca Tours said the eruption had been an issue for the company. "Fortunately, due to fortuitous timing, it hasn't affected any of our group tours, but on the other hand many of our semi-independent clients undertaking tailor-made tours have had their travel disrupted.

"The airlines have been as accommodating as possible and many service providers and hotels in Buenos Aires, Santiago, et cetera, have been fabulous in that they have honoured pre-paid bookings by transferring clients' stays to later dates without imposing fees or applying a 'no show' policy. I guess this is a sign of the excellent relationship we have with our operators and representatives in South America," he said.

"The destination I am most concerned for is the Argentine city of (San Carlos de) Bariloche, which in winter is one of South America's most popular ski resorts. Flights in and out of Bariloche are still not operating and it has been this way since the

initial volcanic eruption, just across the border. The local tourism industry there is really suffering with many individuals being really out of pocket."

BFirst Travel director Marcos Da Silva said clients bound for Bariloche had not cancelled travel plans, but had changed destinations. "It is sad to hear the news from Bariloche and we hope that the situation will improve soon for the locals," he said. "Overall, the volcanic eruption has not impacted our future bookings because South America has many interesting destinations to offer and we are adapting our itinerary suggestions accordingly. It is not too difficult for us to adapt to it, as most of our bookings are tailor-made itineraries."

Bentours business head Jeremy Hearst said the company had seen a very strong uptake of its Antarctica expeditions for the 2011/12 season as new restrictions on large vessels loomed. From August, ships carrying and using heavy fuel oil will be banned from operating in Antarctic waters, which will effectively prevent access to cruise ships with more than 500 passengers. The aim is to help protect the continent's fragile environment.

Hearst said Bentours' Antarctic

cruises, operated by Hurtigruten and Gap Adventures, met the new requirements and would not be affected. "Given that there will be a largely reduced number of visitors able to visit Antarctica in 2012/13, we expect cruises will fill fast, so now is the time to take advantage of early bird deals," he said.

World Expeditions CEO Sue Badyari said there had been a notable trend for clients to combine a number of short trips or extensions to form their own unique itinerary. WE offers more than 30 short trips of fewer than seven days' duration, and sales for these trips were up by almost 200 per cent.

Badyari said sales for World Expeditions' Galapagos cruises were up by 30 per cent, suggesting that a favourite add-on was still in a growth phase.

"Huayhuash in Peru is an emerging trekking destination as travellers look for different and exciting new mountain experiences in South America. The 19-day Huayhuash circuit has been a constant sell-out," she said. As well, for the first time ever the AUD price of WE's polar cruises was cheaper than the advertised USD prices and sales were "absolutely booming".

## sellingSthAmerica



Iguazu Falls, Argentina

## Group tours still preferred

SOME travel agencies still find that South America's former reputation as a somewhat dangerous destination resonates with clients. Corry Fung, supervisor at Sydney's Chung Pak Travel, says few clients are prepared to travel as FIT, much preferring the safety of group tours.

Most, she says, also stick to the tried and true destinations of Argentina, Peru, Chile and Brazil, with the continent's iconic tourist sites such as Buenos Aires, Machu Picchu, Rio de Janeiro, the Amazon and Iguazu always the main drawcards.

Fung says her agency doesn't do a great deal of South America business, with only a few couples travelling to the continent each year, so finding sufficient airline seat capacity has never been an issue.

## Book now for 'significant discounts', says Inca

INCA Tours reports a significant increase in serious enquiries and subsequent bookings for South America in recent months.

Marketing manager Ross Pulbrook said the Global Financial Crisis was "finally a thing of the past", and the strength of the Australian dollar was the major driver of business.

"This has resulted in great value for money holidays for clients who have already travelled to South America this year. It has obviously boosted foreign travel and allowed for many significant discounts and specials being offered across the entire industry. We've been offering between \$1500 and \$2000 per person off some of our set departure small group tours," Pulbrook said.

"We feel however, that our dollar may have peaked, so at some time in the near future it may begin to lose value again. As soon as our dollar starts to decline, the current wave of industry offers will most likely rapidly disappear. With this in mind, we're suggesting to potential clients that perhaps it is time to commit and lock their South America travel



Tikal, Guatemala, one of the sights visited on Inca Tour's Gold Tour

arrangements in while our dollar remains strong."

Inca has plans for a special departure of its enhanced "Inca Gold Tour of Central America, Chile, Cuba and Mexico" early next year. The 33-day luxury tour will depart Australia on February 29, returning on April 1. Pulbrook said the itinerary had been

fine-tuned and improved, with more time to be spent in Costa Rica.

"The usual cost of this tour is \$24,350 per person (twin share) ex-Brisbane, Melbourne and Sydney, but due to the strength of our dollar, we are currently offering a reduction of \$2000 per person for new clients and \$2500 for past Inca Tours' clients."



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Contours introduces Peru community aid opportunity

CONTOURS Travel director Ted Dziadkiewicz last year developed the Contours Collection in conjunction with the founder of Contiki, John Anderson. The collection's tours include boutique trips of 24, 26, and 33 days to Peru, Bolivia, Brazil, Argentina, Chile and Ecuador.

Trips visit the icons of the continent, including the Amazon, Sacred Valley of the Incas, Machu Picchu, Cuzco, Lake Titicaca, Buenos Aires, Patagonia, Santiago, Quito, Otavalo, Riobamba and Cuenca as well as hidden jewels such as Lamay, Amaru, Raqchi, and Sun Island.

The Contours Collection has just started working with Australian Jane Gavel's community organisation, Peru's Challenge. Since October 2003, Peru's Challenge has helped more than 2000 families and helped

to educate more than 800 children in four different communities. It has built four schools, connected more than 200 houses to safe drinking water and installed more than 300 toilets, showers and chimneys.

Travelling with Contours Travel and the Contours Collection, clients are able to visit one of the communities for a day, or even stay to help teach in the schools or help with the construction.

Contours is committed to responsible travel through engaging in a meaningful way with the locals, with such features as visits to non-profit cafés, jungle eco-lodges to weaving co-operatives.

The maximum number of travellers on tours is 18 and all tours depart with a minimum of four clients and a tour leader.

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APT launches 2012 South America program

APT has launched its full 2012 program for South America, which features numerous exclusive experiences, dining options, accommodation, cruising and itineraries. General marketing manager Debra Fox said that these exclusive features were included in the cost of the tour.

"We're making the distinction," she said. "While adding our inclusions, like Freedom of Choice touring and dining options, we've created some really special and memorable experiences not normally packaged in South America tours."

Much of our pre-release product (released earlier this year) has sold out, so we know the small group journeys we have developed for a maximum of 24 passengers will have strong market acceptance, from return and new APT customers."

Among the special experiences are a four-course dinner on Orient-Express' Hiram Bingham Train, an introductory Spanish lesson over coffee and croissants at Buenos Aires' famous Café Tortoni, exploring Uruguay's

Colonia del Sacramento, the country's oldest and arguably most charming town, and attending a tango show at the Rojo Lounge, an exclusive Buenos Aires cabaret, designed by Philippe Starck.

The Sofitel Buenos Aires, the Ritz-Carlton Santiago, the Inkaterra Pueblo Hotel at the base of Machu Picchu and Llao Llao Hotel and Resort near Bariloche, one of The Leading Hotels of the World, are among the hotels chosen by APT, while cruise vessels are the *MV Galapagos Explorer II*, the *MV Stella Australis* for Patagonian fjord journeys and Holland America Line's *ms Veendam* for the Chilean fjords, with a guaranteed veranda suite.

All of APT's small group journeys feature APT's 'Freedom of Choice' touring and dining, APT tour director and local guides, local arrival and departure transfers, port charges and all tipping. The itineraries are fully inclusive, with flights within South America and meals included. APT offers a guaranteed price, which it said provided travel agents with peace of mind when selling this unique product.

# Tucan Travel's Sth American tours top 250

TUCAN Travel has been selling South America for 25 years and claims to be the most experienced tour operator for the region in the Australian market. It now has more than 250 tours on its books covering eight countries.

General manager Justin Ewin said Latin America continued to grow in demand as a destination, but cautioned that "with increased demand comes increased supply and the market is getting saturated. Contiki are the latest to enter the market."

He said Peru, Machu Picchu and the Inca Trail remained among the most popular packages, sights and destinations that Tucan sold, with Inca Trail permits sold out until October. Passengers can still visit by train or taking the alternative Lares trek, Ewin noted.

He said the Patagonia and Antarctic season just finished had been a successful one. "We are the only operator running regular private transport departures in Patagonia and they are popular year-in year-out. In Antarctica, our most popular package is a 10-night 'Classic Antarctica'



Tucan's Patagonia and Antarctica packages are always popular

package to the Antarctic Peninsula. "Rio Carnival happened in March this year and besides running close to 700 passengers through there we also took a famil of 10 travel agents across who were lucky enough to experience the best famil ever. Bookings usually start to ramp up for Carnival in September/October," Ewin said. With the election of a new socialist

Peruvian president, Ollanta Humala, with similar philosophy to Evo Morales in Bolivia and Hugo Chavez in Venezuela, some concern has been expressed about the effect on private enterprise and tourism of income-redistribution policies. But Ewin said he expected no major impact given the importance of the tourism industry to Peru's economy.



## Contiki celebrates 50th anniversary

CONTIKI Holidays is marking its 50th anniversary with the launch of a new South America program, with six tours spanning Peru, Argentina and Brazil. Contiki says it is "staying on the pulse of trends in youth travel" with its new tours, which coincide with the centenary of Machu Picchu's rediscovery.

The first trips run from November 2011, and range from the eight-day "Andes and Amazon Highlights" to the 24-day "The Adventurer", which explores all three countries. Groups average around 20 passengers and Contiki says accommodation includes a mixture of quirky and high-quality, such as an Amazon rainforest eco-lodge.

Locally run, privately chartered transportation is complemented by an eclectic mix of bicycles, motorised canoes, trains, cable cars and triciclos. All trips are led by Contiki tour managers and experienced local guides.



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\*Conditions: Prices are per person based on twin share accommodation, inclusive of discounts and valid for new bookings made by 31 Dec 2011. Subject to availability. The Classic Expedition is valid for sale until 13 Feb 2013. The advertised price is based on departures 20 & 29 Nov, 08 Dec 2012, 13 Feb 2013. In the Realm of the Great Explorers is valid for sale until 22 Feb 2013. The advertised price is based on departures 02 Nov 2012. Single supplements apply. Prices are subject to change. Standard Bentours Terms and Conditions apply. Tempo Holidays trading as Bentours International A.B.N. 51007331213 License No 2TA08293

# Explore remote Patagonia with BFirst Travel



Torres del Paine National Park

BFIRST Travel has a week in the remote mountains of Patagonia priced from \$US1165 per person, covering the Torres del Paine National Park, the Perito Moreno glacier and the FitzRoy Massif. The region close to the southern tip of South America is a world of forests, deep fjords, rarely-visited islands, mountains and glaciers. The rich wildlife heritage includes the Patagonian guanaco, the lesser rhea (an ostrich-like bird) and the huemul (a type of deer).

Travellers may also find pumas,

condors, red and grey foxes and an abundance of marine life including whales, several species of dolphin, otters and Magellanic penguins.

BFirst also offers a North Argentina circuit over 12 days priced from \$US1789 per person. After visiting Buenos Aires, the trip explores the most important cities of the northern region of Argentina – including Mendoza and Salta. It also visits Iguazu for the world's most spectacular waterfalls, jungle and wildlife.

# SATO launches new tour covering the 'essence' of South America

THE South America Tourism Office (SATO) has a new fully escorted tour departing on September 11, "Essence of South America", that covers the key sights of the continent.

Among the destinations are Santiago, Machu Picchu, Cuzco, La Paz, Rio de Janeiro, Iguazu and Buenos Aires. There are also pre- and post-tour extensions available to the Galapagos Islands and the Southern Lakes district.

The cost per person is \$8190 (twin share) for 23 days, which includes international and internal flights, some meals, Vistadome train to Machu Picchu, first-class train from Cuzco to Puno and first-class catamaran across Lake Titicaca.

SATO also has a fly-drive "South American Odyssey" that comes in 35-day and 22-day versions. The longer trip begins in Santiago and includes visits to Lima, Cuzco, Machu Picchu,

Puno and Laz Paz before returning to Santiago. Clients on the longer journey then join, travelling to Valparaiso to board the *ms Veendam* for a 12-day cruise around the southern tip of South America to Buenos Aires.

The trip then visits Iguazu Falls and Rio de Janeiro before returning to Santiago for the flight back to Australia. Fares are from \$10,386 per person for the 35-day trip; from \$8690 per person for the 22-day version.



Christ the Redeemer overlooks Rio de Janeiro

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## Book Antarctica cruises early says Bentours

BENTOURS says cruises for the 2012/13 Antarctic season will fill up quickly with the new limit on large vessels in sensitive polar regions, so now is the time for clients to grab early bird deals.

Bentours has savings of up to 20 per cent on 2012/13 sailings of the following cruises – 19-day "In the Realm of the Great Explorers" from \$5952, 10-day "Classic Expedition" from \$5578, 17-day "Christmas Expedition" from \$8273, 13-day "Weddell Sea Expedition" from \$7381 and 13-day "Polar Circle Expedition" from \$7381. This offer is valid for all new deposited bookings made before December 31 this year.

With great discounts and the strength of the Australian dollar keeping prices down, Bentours says it's one of the most affordable times for travellers to see Antarctica.



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