

This week's dream: Patagonia's wide-open spaces

Time slows down in Patagonia, says Christabelle Dilks in *Wanderlust Magazine*. This extraordinary territory, which encompasses parts of "slender" Chile, "expansive" Argentina and the Andes in between, is so vast and sparsely populated, that "it's impossible to do anything in a hurry". And in Patagonia, there's plenty of room for legends to grow: Butch and Sundance came here to escape the law; Che Guevara came on a motorbike, for his fabled trip along Ruta 40, a hairpin road that hugs the foothills of the Andes. The roads are still part of the appeal: you can travel 1,000km in this country and be lucky to spot "a dozen cars".

With so much ground to cover, it's best to work out an itinerary in advance. Patagonia's lake district is certainly worth including. Nothing like Cumbria, it's a mountainous area, "thickly clad with forests of monkey puzzle trees, and interspersed with sparkling lakes and quaint Alpine-like towns with chalet-style buildings and chocolate shops". From the laid-back town of El Bolsón, you can



Patagonia: the stuff of legends

hike along a "turquoise" river to the "jade-green" shores of Lago Verde.

From there, take a boat to a virgin forest of 3,000-year-old alerce trees, "limpid lakes and hanging glaciers". You might then decide to cross country to the east, to visit Trevelin, a colony made up of the descendants of Welsh pioneers who settled here in the 19th century. Delightful old Welsh grannies serve tea and cake, and tell tales handed down from their own grandmothers. Further south at El Chaltén, there is an early morning bus that goes to Río Pinturas, a dramatic canyon with caves – *Cueva de las*

Manos – adorned with paintings that date back 10,000 years. At the southern tip of the Andes lies the land that Darwin named Tierra del Fuego (land of fire). The pioneer town of Ushuaia is the world's southernmost city; if you go there, you can justly claim to have been to "the end of the world". *British Airways* (0870-850 9850; www.ba.com) flies to Buenos Aires from £750 rtn. www.turismo.gov.ar; www.visit-chile.org.

Hotel of the week



Hotel Bel-Air, Los Angeles

Marilyn Monroe had a permanent suite here; Prince Charles described it as "like staying at the house of a rich friend". Hotel Bel-Air recently turned 60, and marked the anniversary with a \$20m makeover, says Terri Judd in *The Independent*. The atmosphere, however, remains one of "old Hollywood" glamour, with just a hint of "faux-English country house". In terms of service, "little is left to chance", and every guest is "made to feel like a visiting dignitary". Complimentary cars will take you anywhere within five miles, or you could just languish in the "lush" gardens and watch the "movie moguls" drift by.

Contact: 001 310 472 1211; www.hotelbelair.com. Doubles from £265.

Getting the flavour of...

Fjords in Quebec

Why do Britons never go to Quebec, asks Paul Newman in *The Independent* on Sunday. Although British Columbia and Toronto are firmly on the tourist map, Quebec – despite its stunning natural beauty – is largely ignored by everyone but the French. The first settlers came here 170 years ago, yet most of its countryside – a place of forests, mountains and lakes – remains undeveloped, and undiscovered. Quebec City is the oldest, and only walled, city in North America, and it has a "distinctly European" feel. From here, its 200km to Saguenay, the northern hemisphere's most southerly fjord, a "spectacular" 100km-long inlet which is best seen from the air (short flights cost around £80). The view is "stunning": gorges, pine forests, and the "glorious Saguenay, a thick ribbon of deep blue water" that stretches far into the distance.

Canadian Affair (020-7616 9999; www.canadianaffair.com) flies from £388rtn.

Diving for cheats

If you like the idea of scuba diving, but can't face the training, help is at hand, says Stephen Bleach in *The Sunday Times*. Meet BOB – aka Breathing Observation Bubble – a 2ft-wide Perspex dome that allows you to explore the wonders of the deep without the need for air tank, mask or snorkel. Oxygen is pumped into the bubble, which has a motor, a steering

mechanism, and a chassis to sit on. The idea is very "Heath Robinson", but you don't need to be Jacques Cousteau to get the hang of it – the training takes a mere five minutes, and it's as "easy as pie" to use. Manoeuvring BOB feels a little "peculiar" at first, but for anyone who has never taken a Padi class, this new world is just breathtaking. Where on land, wild animals are shy and hard to spot, underwater they crowd around you to "gawp". No wonder divers always "look so smug". For info on BOB centres around the world, email sppm@bob-diving-center.com.

Bath's belated spa

Bath's new spa finally opened last week, after a four-year delay that became as farcical as those other Great British building projects, the Dome, Holyrood and Wembley, says Tom Robbins in *The Observer*. Mistakes were legion – from the Three Tenors' "opening concert", that was three years premature, to the £4.3m wasted on the wrong paint. The spa should have cost £13m; the final bill was £45m. Yet somehow the building manages to "rise above" the furore, with "cool glass, clean lines and calm, yellow stone". The futuristic design has echoes of the 18th century buildings to which it is "seamlessly" joined. And with a huge range of therapies on offer, you could almost say it was worth the wait. *Thermae Bath Spa*: 01225-335678; www.thermaebathspa.com. Entry £19.

Last-minute offers from top travel companies

Five-star Cuba

Captivating Cuba (0870-887 0123; www.captivatingcuba.com) has 13 nights in Havana's Royal Hideaway resort from £1,135pp, which includes flights, breakfast and four spa treatments.

Disneyland Paris

Get a free day pass to Disneyland Resort Paris during August and September with Shortbreaks (0870-027 6076; www.short-breaks.com). Two nights' b&b, including Eurostar, now costs £99pp.

A week in a hayloft

A week in a converted hayloft (sleeps two) on Dartmoor, complete with games room and tennis court, costs £396 with Classic Cottages (01326-555555; www.classic.co.uk). From 26 Aug.

Mobile home in France

Ten nights at Camping L'Orée du Bois in Charente-Maritime, in a fully equipped mobile home, costs £455 with Venue (01233-629950; www.venue-holidays.co.uk), not including ferry crossings. From 23 Aug.