

(3) August 2011

Cars will be shipped to Cartagena on the Caribbean coast of Colombia. Founded in 1533, this city became Spain's main port in the Caribbean. With its walled city and imposing fortress, built to deter pirates, it has now become a fashionable resort.

Our hotel inside the old city wall is a carefully converted seventeenth century convent with its original cloister. A three day stay will allow time for collection and preparation of the vehicles as well as a little sightseeing and relaxation.

Day 5. Heading East, we cross the Magdalena River before turning South in front of The Sierra Nevada Mountains. The route follows the river valley to a small town where we stay in a simple motel, in contrast to the luxury of previous nights.

Day 6. Soon after departure, the road starts climbing into the mountains before passing through the large city of Bucaramanga. It then winds beside the Chicamocha canyon, with its Parque Nacional, to the adventure sports centre of San Gil. A walk in river-side park here can be an other-worldly experience as the trees are festooned with glistening growths of old man's beard. We turn off the main road here for a short climb to the beautiful small town of Barichara where we rest in a colonial mansion. For the adventurous, there is an ancient stone road to explore before trying the local delicacy, roasted ants.

Day 7. There are two stops on the way to Bogota involving short detours from the Panamericana. The Villa de Lleyva is a beautifully preserved colonial town with a huge central square of cobbles, and later there is the opportunity to visit the Salt Cathedral, constructed in an old salt mine close to the town of Zipaquirá. With an 18 metre vaulted ceiling, it can hold a congregation of 8000. We continue to the chaotic and colourful capital of eight million inhabitants.

Day 8. The morning has been left free for a visit to the city centre where the Gold Museum is a must-see attraction. After lunch we drive down to cross the Magdalena River again before climbing back up to Ibagué.

Day 9,10. We pass through coffee country on the way to Popayan for our first rest day. The road will be busy and the first section runs over La Linea pass where a huge tunnel is under construction, but sadly will not be completed until after 2013. The colonial city of Popayan has been carefully restored after a devastating earthquake in 1983, and will appear tidy and tranquil after the capital.

Day 11-13. After another night in the mountains at Pasto, we cross the border to Ecuador. The huge local market at Otavalo may be worth a stop on the way to the capital city of Quito. At an altitude of 2850 metres, it sits in a valley surrounded by snowy peaks. It has a spring-like climate all year round and you will have had enough introduction to altitude to manage a walking tour of the old city or a trip to the statue of the virgin overlooking the metropolis.

Day 14-16. We pass through 'Volcano Alley' which contains some of the World's most active volcanoes, including Cotopaxi which has erupted on average 20 times per century, before overnighing in a hacienda. The next day, there is a break for a short visit to the historical site at Ingapirca which is sparse, but contains the most important Inca ruins in the country. We continue to Cuenca. There is time in the morning to explore this large city, which is blessed with beautiful old buildings and cobbled streets, before we head for our last night in Ecuador at Loja.

Day 17,18. After the border crossing into Peru the route heads for Piura, where we rest, before making our way to the coast and on to the large city of Chiclayo. Near this city archaeologists discovered the only royal burial in Peru to escape the tomb robbers. The Lord of Sipan, ruler of the Mochica civilization, was buried with 200 pieces of pottery and 100 pieces of gold, silver and copper jewellery. A half day has been allotted to investigate the original site, the artefacts now displayed in a huge new museum, or the nearby pyramids constructed of adobe bricks which are now heavily weathered. Chiclayo also has a famous 'witchdoctors market' selling herbal remedies.

Day 19. We continue to Trujillo where we have a half day to visit the vast adobe city built by the Chimú, who were eventually conquered by the Inca. The urban centre covers six square kilometres and once had 30,000 inhabitants. One royal area has been restored for visitors. There are other Chimú sites close to the city included in your Chan Chan ticket, and also near the town is an older heavily-weathered Moche pyramid built with 140 million adobe bricks.

Day 20-22. The route heads south staying close to the Peruvian coast, with a night stop in the fashionable resort area of Miraflores in Lima before continuing on the Panamericana to Nasca for a rest day.

Flights to view the famous lines can be arranged and there will be time for some relaxation before tackling the uplands.

Day 23-27. We have a two day climb to the former capital of the Inca Empire at Cusco. Here there are three rest days to allow plenty of time to service the vehicles and to acclimatise to the altitude (3400 m at Cusco) with coca leaf tea at an excellent hotel. The city itself has many buildings with the remains of precisely cut Inca stone walls for foundations. It is overlooked by the massive walled complex of Sacsayhuaman. Trips can be made to the pretty town of Pisac, with its own ruins, its market brightened by the colourful costumes of the indigenous population. Other popular excursions include a trip to the small town of Ollantaytambo, with its Inca fortress, and a train ride to the remote 'lost city' of Machu Picchu sitting in the clouds above the Urubamba River.

Day 28,29. The route travels over the Raya Pass (4300m) to our Puno hotel set on a headland overlooking Lake Titicaca, where the reed boats that were the inspiration for the Kon-Tiki can still be seen. We take a leisurely drive along the lakeside and may take the tiny ferry across the narrows of the lake on the way to La Paz in Bolivia.

Day 30,31 We travel through the heart of the Bolivian altiplano to the highest city in the World at Potosi (4090m) which at the peak of the silver mining activities in the seventeenth to eighteenth century had the same population as London. A wealth of colonial architecture remains to remind visitors of its glory days, including the superb eighteenth century Royal Mint which has an excellent museum. After enjoying the city we move on to the edge of the World's largest salt lake, the Salar de Uyuni. The circuitous route taken at this stage is to avoid the many dirt roads of Bolivia which have trashed the vehicles of many adventurers. We are sticking to tarmac where possible.

Day 32-34. A fleece is now essential as temperatures on the altiplano can reach 30C during the day and -25C at night. Our only venture off the hard roads is to travel over the pristine white surface of the salt flat for a few hours and then on a short section of unmade road to regain the newly metalled road to another old silver town, Oruro. We then take a high pass through the Sajama National Park, which was created to protect the vicuna, and cross the border into Chile to reach the sea at Arica with a rest day on the beach.

Day 35,36. We have a long day driving down the coast before turning inland to reach San Pedro de Atacama, a relaxed and interesting tourist town of adobe buildings. On the rest day it is possible to drive to the nearby salt flats, to visit salt water lakes with three species of flamingo, to take a dip in a saline lake or hot spring or take a long early morning trip to see the El Tatio geyser field.

Day 37-39. We drive over the Jama Pass (4400m) into Argentina on a recently improved hard road to San Salvador de Jujuy, passing along part of the Humahuaca Gorge with its multi-coloured rocks. Our journey then travels past most of the main wine-growing areas to San Juan, and eventually through Mendoza. Argentine wines are grown in high, dry terrain and require considerable irrigation for successful production.

Day 40,41. We take our last mountain pass (2900m) close to the highest peak in the Americas, Aconcagua (6962m), before returning to Chile and a rest day near Valparaiso, with its adjoining resort area of Vina del Mar, on the Pacific coast. From the port area in Valparaiso's bay, row upon row of colourful houses rise steeply up the surrounding hills which can be accessed by the city's fifteen funicular lifts.

Day 42-45. The route reaches the beautiful lake district of Chile where excellent accommodation and food is available amongst the woods, lakes and snow-tipped volcanoes. We stay in an impressive timber-clad hotel on the shore of Lake Villarrica nestling under the volcano of the same name. Nearby Pucon is a small lake-side town offering visitors rafting, fishing, riding, climbing and visits to thermal spas. The vehicles then cross the border to take a spectacular drive through the Argentine Lake District to the popular resort of Bariloche for a rest day by the lake at the iconic Llao Llao Hotel.

Day 46-49. Two days of very long distance on excellent roads have been planned to avoid a prolonged spell on typical Patagonian ripio roads. These are constructed of dirt and gravel with added large stones which help to prevent erosion in the constant winds. They can be excellent - but can also be washboarded, pot-holed, very dusty or muddy according to recent conditions. Our roundabout route leads to a rest day in the lively small town of El Calafate, the gateway to the Moreno Glacier, one of the few glaciers still advancing. You can watch the glacier calving off huge chunks of ice into the blue waters of the lake or take a stroll across it in crampons.

Day 50-53. After leaving El Calafate, the road eventually becomes an unavoidable section of ripio as we track back into Chile to the famous Torres del Paine National Park. Our three day stay will be in a superb hotel with a stunning backdrop of snow-capped mountains, glaciers, lakes and deserted green valleys full of wild flowers. A large programme of hiking, horseriding or trips on the lake is available.

Day 54,55. Heading South for a short time on ripio, we reach tarmac and then follow the Magellan Strait before crossing it by ferry on our way to the most Southerly city in the World. Ushuaia sits on the Beagle Channel set against a backdrop of mountains and is constantly blasted by the ferocious winds of Tierra del Fuego.

The flight home is via Buenos Aires where you may wish to stop off for a day or so.