

In Latin America, Luxe Costs Less

By MICHELLE HIGGINS

LATIN AMERICA has long been an affordable, budget-oriented travel destination.

the bargain-tempting — comes to a hotel. Most of these Europe-belt are getting more money in treatments services are not good a course, really at least that well.

And things still. Hotel America fell first half of the same according to Price Index steeper than in North Am.

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In Mexic deals are megaresort Maya, just Grand Vela and up, wh

in the travel downward the: the Balyan Tree Mayatoba, where villos have their own plunge pools, is offering 50 percent off two-night packages with daily breakfast, a massage and dinner for two. Nearby, the Mandarin

Oriental has a seven-night holiday in Mexico deal that includes breakfast, airport transfers, ill-

through Peru, visiting Machu Picchu, Lake Titicaca, Lima and the Paracas National Reserve,

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ing, the (invest) vacation, (invest) in Pawtucket, R.I., recently reported that revenue for its Discover South America tour more than doubled from last year. Interest in Peru in particular is picking up. Its 11-day trip

hatched to the next, post farm where locals will use ox-drawn plows and spectacular backdrops with snow-peaked volcanoes.

There are perks, especially if you're a big shopper. Handmade leather handbags from the town

of Cotacachi, for example, can be bargained down to about \$20. "The same would retail for at least \$400 in the U.S.," said Sonya Bradley, the Latin America tour manager for Country Walker.

For affordable luxury outside the city of Buenos Aires, Vanessa Guibert Heitner, of Limitless Argentina, a luxury travel agency, recommends that visitors head northwest to the provinces of Salta and Jujuy, to explore indigenous ruins, colonial architecture and the natural scenery of the region. Legado Mitico Salta, a boutique hotel within walking distance of colonial cathedrals, museums and restaurants, starts at \$170 a night with breakfast. For \$295 a person, Limitless Argentina can arrange a private tour of Salta and the wine belt of Cafayate, about two hours away, including visits to artisanal goat-cheese makers, hikes through canyons and a private food and wine pairing at a winery.

It's also a good time to visit Rio de Janeiro, which is celebrating its 2006 Olympic bid win. Getting to Brazil is easier with 14 new flights this year from the United States, including daily nonstop service from Houston to Rio on Continental and flights three times a week from Atlanta to Brasilia on Delta. Several more are planned for 2010.

Recife, a historic town on Brazil's northern coast, dubbed the Brazilian Venice for its many bridges and rivers, is one of the places expected to benefit from new flights, with routes from Atlanta and Miami. In late February, when the average temperature is 82 degrees there, rates at the Internacional Palace Hotel in Recife start at about 190 Brazilian reais, about \$100 at 1.75 reais to the dollar.

To maximize your budget, go just after Carnival, which runs Feb. 12 to 16, when hotel rates drop sharply. The Pestana Rio Atlantica in Rio, with views of Copacabana Beach, for example, is 490 reais a night in late February, down from 1,495 during Carnival. ■