

Enjoying Peru's age-old charms in new style

It's a country beloved of backpackers, but it's no longer one in which you need to rough it, as Drusilla Beyfus discovered on a two-week tour.

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A man-made floating island on Lake Titicaca

The Orient Express Hiram Bingham train is the no-sweat way to reach Machu Picchu. Named after the American explorer who is known for putting the Inca site on the map, the narrow-gauge train skirts the famous Inca trail as it chugs along and trekkers can be spotted.

One is well placed to raise a glass to them. The pre-prandial cocktail aboard is pisco sour, a national brew made from Chilean brandy, lemon juice, egg-white syrup and bitters.

Lunch aboard is served at a table nicely laid with linen, at your seat number. In the observation car that houses the bar, travellers may stand at the open end, watching the rails disappearing in the distance, imagining they are royalty or, perhaps, a sheriff in a Western.

At Machu Picchu, we stayed at the Sanctuary Lodge. The densely forested, towering mountains enfolding us were every whit as thrilling as the site itself - and the mystery that surrounds the origins of the ruins.

However, I felt oddly at home with some of the bigger constructions as they looked so modern. As Hugh Thomson wrote in his influential book *The White Rock*, "The Inca aesthetic was abstract in a way that chimes with 20th-century impulses."

Whereas few travellers need to be reminded of the fascination of Machu Picchu, what tends to escape notice abroad is the degree to which Peru has upped its efforts in high-end travel.

So when the possibility was broached of my going on a private tour of the country, no thoughts of roughing it crossed my mind. However, what did concern me was my suitability for the project. I'm not particularly experienced as a traveller.

I didn't know how I would take to the demands of a full-on tour, the extremes of climate, the high altitudes, let alone get a grip on the kit and clothes I thought would be needed.

Even allowing for the high-end label, I was surprised by the level of sophistication of some of the shopping that awaited, one of the many contrasts in living standards that exist where child beggars are ubiquitous. The indigenous markets do the ethnic bit, but there is much more. At Lima and Cusco, especially, the shopping is diverse and competitively priced.

Best buys are alpaca knits, hats both folkloric and secular, handicrafts - notably woven textiles - and imaginative silver and gold jewellery. Whereas many a Peruvian-style poncho can be found in the shops back home, much of the good stuff is not yet exported to Britain.

The classy hotel has come to stay. The Libertador Lake Titicaca Puno is a white building on a private island by the lakeshore, whose large windows are filled with the prospect of the waters.

I had a global moment in my room. Watching dawn break in sunlit wavelets over the highest navigable lake on the planet, I was keeping half an eye on what was happening in Afghanistan on the television - and then London called on my mobile phone.

Another leader is the swanky Hotel Monasterio in Cusco, a former convent with 16th-century cloisters. It has been elegantly restored and goes a bundle on top-class service. Admittedly, these places all cost, but Peru, like any other great country, needs to cater to visitors who want the best and can pay for it.

Peru's cuisine, meanwhile, has the reputation of being starchy and limited - and by implication its restaurants do too. But, in fact, Peru is rich in natural produce such as seafood, poultry, cereals, spices and alpaca (the taste is reminiscent of veal), and leading restaurateurs have jumped to and worked on their menus.

Like the architecture, Peru's cuisine is a concoction of many influences from South America, the Mediterranean, Europe, and Arabia. Take La Rosa Nautica at Miraflores, Lima, perched at the end of an historic pier reaching out into the Pacific, where diners can tuck into ceviche, a national dish made of raw fish, or shrimp

marinated in lemon juice, or a plate of ravioli served in a creamy shrimp sauce. During daylight, diners may work up an appetite watching the surfers below skim the waves of the ocean.

What persuaded me to join the tour, and discover all this for myself, was a hugely exciting itinerary that focused on architecture, archaeology, art and culture. Stones and bones: irresistible!

On the two-week trip we were to visit Lima, Arequipa, the Colca Canyon, Puno, Cusco, Machu Picchu, and the Sacred Valley. We would travel by tour bus, on charter flights, on foot - and via two of the greatest train journeys on earth.

At Lima, the gold and silver works of art by pre-Columbian metal workers at the Gold Museum suggested that Tiffany's has a long way to go to compete with the craft skills of the ancients.

The golden pieces in particular are the ultimate in prehistoric bling. We were to learn a lot about gold. The Incas, for example, didn't set a material value on it as we do; it took the conquering Spanish to do that.

On the way from the capital to Arequipa we took a detour to the Nasca Lines in the desert. These gargantuan, cartoon-like drawings of animals spring into relief when seen from the air.

We took a private plane to Ica, then split into small groups and clambered into the little planes that fly the Lines. The pilots tilt their craft steeply from one side to the other, pointing at the designs with the wingtips. Not a side trip for those likely to need a sick bag.

At Arequipa's Museo Santuarios Andinos, Juanita jolts visitors into an awareness that human sacrifice was part of early Andean civilisation. Inside a glass display case kept at freezing point lies the fragile mummy of a young woman aged between 12 and 14.

Her body, complete with funeral wrappings, was discovered by accident in the last decade, buried on a glacial Andean peak. As a daughter of a prominent family, "Juanita the Ice Princess" was sacrificed to appease the deities of the mountains, and her cheek bears the mark of the blow that killed her.

At the Plaza de Armas, the Jesuit church of La Compañía boasts a fabulously ornate façade and a main altar that is a hymn to gold leaf. The architecture reflected what we often saw in the churches and buildings we visited: a clash of cultures in which Latin America gave birth to quirky hybrids based on a mixture of native and Spanish styles.

This theme cropped up in religious painting, too. Where else could one find a guinea pig, prepared for the table, as the centrepiece of a reverential portrayal of The Last Supper?

During the long bumpy drive to the Colca Canyon through the Aguada Blanca National Vicuña Reserve, I wished that the roads were as good as the drivers.

But memorable moments remain with me. At a comfort stop, a tame young alpaca came to nuzzle out the coca leaf remains at the bottom of my cuppa.

Later we caught the last of the warm sunshine on a dip in the thermal springs at Chivay - and rose early for the journey to Cruz del Cóndor to see the vast raptors wheel above the canyon, cut to size by the scale of the landscape.

Our next stop was Puno, and a detour to Sillustani to view mausoleums built by a warrior tribe later ruled by the Incas.

These funerary towers housed the remains of family groups, with food and belongings for the next world. How did the ancients move those enormous blocks of stone up to 50ft high without knowledge of the wheel, or master such sophisticated building techniques without writing? There is much that remains unexplained.

At Puno, we took a private launch to the floating reed islands of Lake Titicaca, whose touristy associations are daunting, but which are like nowhere else.

The islanders are self-sufficient and largely live off fishing and tourism. As we set foot on the soft ground, one wag among us said, "Here comes the economy." We did our stuff buying souvenirs and taking rides on the reed canoes.

On we went to Cusco by a day-long train ride through a landscape of villages, farms and herds of grazing alpacas and llamas, with the overwhelming Andes as a backdrop.

The journey is a fitting prelude to Cusco, whose narrow streets are lined with geometric stone walls built by the Incas. Elegant plazas are fronted by buildings in a mishmash of styles, with Moorish balconies sitting above colonial-style columns.

Our tour took in countless effigies and icons from the scriptures, but I wondered what an Inca deity might look like.

One answer is the monumental carving in stone of the head of an Inca god high in the mountains at Ollantaytambo in the Sacred Valley, visible from miles away. Its massive profile delineates the cusp of the mountain, and to modern eyes has an extremely forbidding aspect. The Sacred Valley also offers worldly attractions, such as great woven items.

At Chinchero the locals put on a display in our honour, wearing their customary folk dress. The weavers washed the raw wool by hand (no Persil, but a root scraped in water for its cleansing properties), dyed it in a huge metal pan, then demonstrated their spinning techniques and the way they work the loom.

A clear bright red used in the knitted wool scarf that I bought owes its shade in part to the ammonia in the babies' urine that is added to the dye - or so they say.

If my trip taught me nothing else it's the importance of tourism to the future prosperity of this underdeveloped country. But it is a force that has to be developed intelligently, as the milling crowds at the top tourist routes indicate.