



OFF-PISTE PERU

Too much Machu Picchu? Culturally curious and intrepid travellers are winging it to less-explored southern Peru for its startling landscapes, remote valleys and polished lodgings all watched over by soaring Andean condors.

WORDS BY STANLEY STEWART

ANDEAN ALLURE

Carpa is a safari-style canvas tent at Pucio in Peru's Colea Valley. Opposite: The landscape spans romantic grasslands, jagged canyons and pre-Incan terraces.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY RAFAELA BERTORINI & IVAN SALINERO



Every night, in the depths of the Colca Canyon, a poem appeared on my pillow, the lines printed on a single sheet of unbleached paper. On the first night it was Wordsworth. I read it on the verandah of my tent, the sound of the river below, a bright sky of stars above. The poem seemed to echo this place. “The stars are out by twos and threes... And a far-off wind that rushes, and a sound of water that gushes... Fills all the hollow of the sky.”

I was deep in southern Peru on a travesía, a journey across the Altiplano, to Colca Canyon and Lake Titicaca through some of the most remarkable landscapes in South America. I wasn’t in the mood for tourist hordes and these regions get a quarter of the visitors of Machu Picchu which, on my last visit there, seemed overwhelmed by crowds. I was travelling with Andean, a small collection of luxury hotels. Founded by Peruvian entrepreneur Ignacio Masias, the company remains in the imaginative care of the family. There are only six properties, small boutique hotels, each one unique, which have captured the imagination of serious travellers across the continent with their elegant, even poetic,

design. The poems left on the pillows, akin to literary chocolates, tell you a lot about their style.

I began in Arequipa, Peru’s most beautiful city, full of fine colonial churches and mansions, built with the white sillar stone of the region. It is a sophisticated and rather aloof city, which tends to look down on the grubby machinations of the capital, Lima. Just off the main square is the magnificent Jesuit church, its façade riotous with decorative embellishment. It was Sunday morning, post mass, and the congregation were streaming out into the sunlight, everyone in a good mood and a fine hat.

In Peru, especially among women, hats are a badge of identity. From bowler hats to high-crowned fedoras, from colourful knitted caps to elaborate affairs like lampshades, hats tell the observer where the wearer is from as well as their social, marital and cultural status. To fit in, I bought a hat in the market, a wide-brimmed Indiana Jones number. It told people that I was someone from nowhere of consequence, with no status and no understanding of Peruvian hat nuances.

A few streets away from the Jesuit extravaganza was the Convent of Santa Catalina, a city within a city. In the 16th century, convents were often a place to sequester young wayward or “fallen” women. Many of the nuns were not there by choice, which is probably why Casanova had such success hanging round convents in Venice waiting for women to come over the walls. But Santa Catalina was different. In Santa Catalina, women had learned to game the system, turning what should have been an austere convent into a set of bijou apartments. Admission was restricted to women from wealthy aristocratic families. Sackcloth and ashes were out, luxury and comforts were in, with nuns being tended by servants, cooks and slaves.

The Santa Catalina nuns had money, which is what may have attracted the attention of Pope Pius IX in the late 19th century. Something of a spoilsport, he dispatched a strict nun from Rome to sort things out, obliging the residents of Santa Catalina to do their own washing, cook their own meals, and swap the apartment living for communal dormitories. Meanwhile, their gold was shipped to the Vatican. The new regime did not prove quite as popular as the old one. Today there are only 13 nuns in a convent that once held over 200.

I was staying in monastic splendour myself, a few streets away at Cirqa, the first of my Andean properties, dating back to 1540 and the foundation of Arequipa. The building has had a chequered history – Dominicans, earthquakes, secret catacombs, developers, more earthquakes, a long spell as a mouldering atmospheric ruin – before it was acquired by Andean, who have conjured out of the dilapidation one of South America’s finest boutique hotels.

Through a colossal wooden door, I was ushered down intimate passageways to a hushed courtyard that was once the monastic cloisters. The old walls framed fine stone mosaics and hardwood floors. Beneath its barrel-vaulted ceiling, my room had a chaise longue, a bath large enough for two, a carpet so exquisitely antique the pattern was a ghost. Intriguing art pieces hung from the old



REVEL IN THE WHITE CITY
Exploring the storied hallways of Cirqa, a one-time monastery turned ethereal bolthole. Clockwise from right: the hotel’s Bóveda suite has original high-vaulted ceilings; Santa Catalina Monastery is an architectural masterpiece; a classic Volkswagen Beetle; Virginia Mamani, Andean’s regional manager; chupe de camarones, Peruvian prawn chowder, at Cirqa. Opposite: Arequipa Cathedral blends neo-Renaissance and Gothic influences.



PHOTOGRAPHY BY SEBASTIAN LEON



FULL CIRQA
The warm hues and dramatic arches of Santa Catalina Monastery. Clockwise from right: Cirqa's inviting terrace for dining and tipping; the lodging has a soulful ambience; entrance to the salon; Arequipa's streets have a timeless character. Opposite: Aerial view of the White City and its chalky sillar – volcanic rock – buildings.



PHOTOGRAPH BY SEBASTIAN LEON





HAPPY VALLEY
Left: Steam from the Pinchollo geyser in the Colca Valley. Above: Carpa Refugio is the largest of the canvas tents at Puqio; unwind in the serene interior of a Pirca room.



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walls, alpaca fleeces were draped over elegant chairs, a Spanish wooden chest acted as a safety deposit box, candles burned in the alcoves in the evenings, while fire-pits glowed in the courtyard.

In the old refectory, with white linen-covered tables and a log fire roaring in a huge stone fireplace, a succession of divine dishes arrived. In recent years Peruvian food has achieved considerable fame – some of the world’s best restaurants are now in Lima. Part of the secret is the country’s astonishing range of ingredients, from the high Andes to the fish-rich Pacific to the Amazon. But it is also the fusion influences that, like in Australia, come from an immigrant history – indigenous flavours mixed with Spanish, Japanese, Arabian, Italian, African, and Cantonese touches. Under the direction of Andean’s executive chef, Maria Fé García, Cirqa’s kitchen was a magical mystery tour, with tastes, textures and aromas I had never encountered before.

The following day, a car arrived to ferry me northwards across the Altiplano, a high altitude treeless world littered with boulders and cactus, framed by volcanoes. Cloud shadows marched in slow procession over empty landscapes that were bleak and magnificent and vast. Among the yellow grasses, ruddy-faced children watched over herds of woolly alpacas. At a mirador, the guide named the volcanoes hugging the horizons – Ubinas, Misti, Chachani, Ampato, and Sabancaya, the last still active, smoking in the distance – while a herd of vicunas floated past. Then the road turned suddenly downwards and we seemed to be in freefall, dropping a kilometre in altitude as we descended into the depths of the Colca Canyon in a spectacular series of hairpins.

Colca is reputed to be one of the world’s deepest canyons – in places twice as deep as the Grand Canyon. In its depths, above the Colca River, is a fine agricultural world of pre-Inca stone terraces, still in use, while in the small towns dotted down the length of the canyon colossal colonial churches are moored like galleons among colourful one-storey houses.

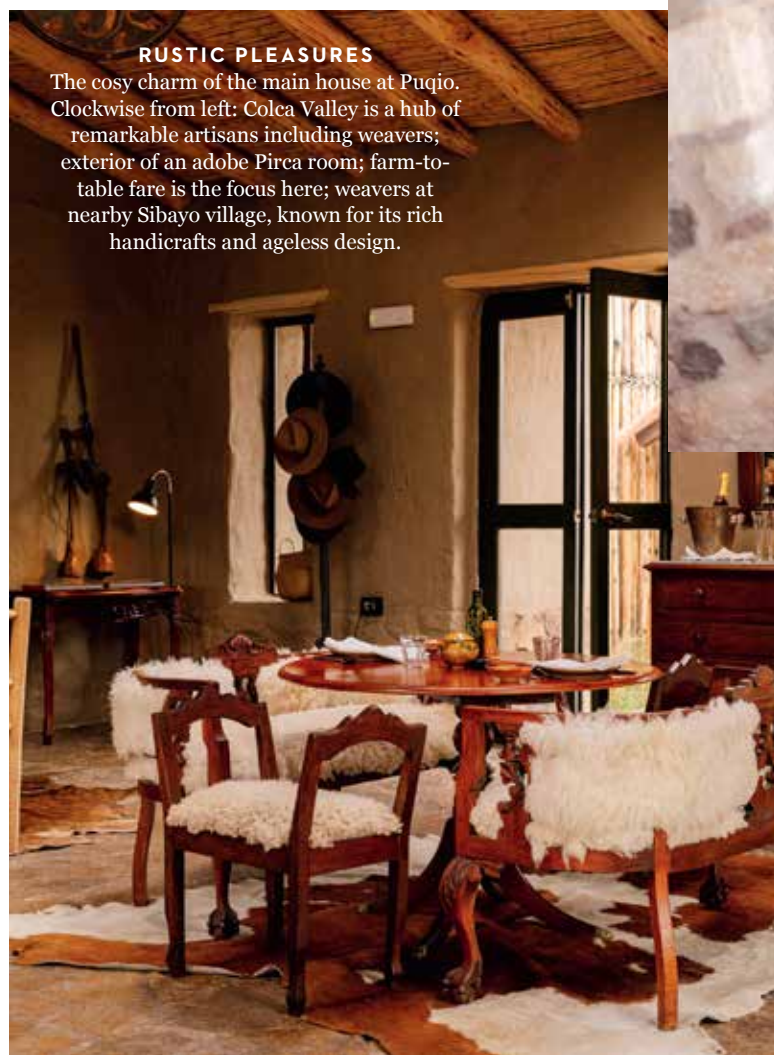
Close to the town of Yanque, Andean has just opened a new property. Puqio is a tented camp perched on a ledge above the river with a splendid Victorian safari vibe, as though you were suddenly on a particularly well-funded expedition in the wilds of Africa. My tent had a wood-burning cast-iron stove, a wing chair with a footstool, a chaise longue, lavish bedding, a writing desk, and an outdoor freestanding bathtub from which I could stargaze beneath the clearest of skies.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY RAFAELLA BERTORINI, IVAN SALINERO & MICHELLE OSPINO



RUSTIC PLEASURES

The cosy charm of the main house at Puqio. Clockwise from left: Colca Valley is a hub of remarkable artisans including weavers; exterior of an adobe Pirca room; farm-to-table fare is the focus here; weavers at nearby Sibayo village, known for its rich handicrafts and ageless design.



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bright embroidered blouses and 1930s gangster hats. A motorcycle came round a bend bearing a man and woman with three children pressed between them. When the lake appeared, an emblematic flock of flamingos were standing knee-deep in the shallows.

Often cited as the highest navigable lake in the world, at almost 4000 metres, Titicaca is a sacred place for the Inca as well as to the local people around its shores. It's said the mother and father of the Inca, Mama Ocllo and Manco Cápac, emerged from the waters of the lake after global floods to repopulate the Earth and return civilisation to humanity. A place of myths and mysteries, the lake has long been haunted by legends of lost cities beneath its waters.

On fine days, you can watch clouds floating across Titicaca's mirrored surfaces. Round the horizons, which seem to bend away from you, are more Andean summits. In 2000, those rumours of sunken cities were confirmed. Near the Isla del Sol, a dive team found temples and terraces, stone heads and ceramics in watery shafts of light. The lake is home to a remarkable culture, the Uros, who fled invasions by escaping into the lake's reed beds. Only a few hundred remain, still living on floating islands of piled reeds. When the Inca ruled those regions, they considered the Uros sub-human and so poor they required only a hollow reed filled with lice as a tribute from them.

When I went to visit one of the islands, I found three cheerful women, huddled round a stove cooking fish broth, the stove set on a stone so it would not set fire to their floating home. Composed entirely of piled reeds, the island felt like being aboard a raft in an uneasy swell, each step a little uncertain. Five families, some 18 people, connected by marriage, lived on the island in reed huts in which they slept bundled together for warmth.

FLOATING ON AIR
A beaming boy and his tortora reed boat. The indigenous Uros people of Lake Titicaca use the reed in myriad ingenious ways. Right: At Titilaka, a breakfast of tamales and other treats.

When I asked an old man about his work – he was knitting together bundles of reeds to create a small boat – he said he was making a “romantic taxi” for his grandson. Recently married, he would need the boat for “intimate moments”, he explained. The young couple would need to escape into the reed beds for any privacy. When I enquired about the chief problem of island life, he didn't cite the limitations of diet or the confinement of their small water-bound home or even the strategies required for love-making. Instead he looked up at me with a long face, rubbed his knees and said simply – rheumatism. Humidity levels in this island world were 75 per cent.

On a promontory on the southern shore of Titicaca was Titilaka lodge, the third of my Andean properties. It was another design triumph with its distressed leather sofas, its armchairs upholstered in subtle Andean textiles, its artwork, and its wonderful menus. Floor-to-ceiling windows brought the changing moods of the lake into light-filled interiors. On my last night, with the moon on the lake, another poem appeared on my pillow, Wordsworth again. “This Sea that bares her bosom to the moon... Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea; Or hear old Triton blow his wreathed horn.” It seemed apt – Greek mythologies on shores so steeped in myth. 🍷

THE FINE PRINT

The writer was a guest of Plan South America, which has tailor-made itineraries of southern Peru starting in Lima and travelling to Arequipa, Colca Canyon and Lake Titicaca. A 12-night itinerary featuring Andean properties starts at \$US14,384 per person, including ground services, meals, and domestic flights (excludes international flights). [plansouthamerica.com](#)

The most luxurious way to reach Arequipa is on the *Andean Explorer*, A Belmond Train. Prices from Cusco to Arequipa are from \$US9000 for a double cabin. Belmond's property in Colca Canyon, Las Casitas, has 20 smart bungalows in soothing gardens. Rooms from \$US500. [belmond.com](#)

PHOTOGRAPHY BY IVAN SALINERO



LAKE PLACID
Titalaka is a retreat on Lake Titicaca with wraparound terraces and overwater decks. Clockwise from left: the hotel's restaurant prioritises fresh seafood; the lakeside communities are studded with master weavers; Bolivia's Cordillera Real range glimpsed from the Peruvian side of the lake; a signature cocktail at the resort made of sherry, vermouth, port, and grapefruit bitters; weavers on the island of Taquile.