

Peru perhaps?

Rhian Williams, one of Audley's South American Specialists, recently returned to Peru.



RHIAN ON LAKE TITICACA

Upon the mention of Peru what images spring to mind? Perhaps it's Machu Picchu hidden in the dense cloud forest? Is it the dizzy heights of Lake Titicaca or the condor circling on the thermals in Colca Canyon? Or is it all of these mingled together with the vibrant, colourful people of Cuzco and its ancient Inca architecture. I had the fortune to return recently to some of these unique places and rediscover the treasures of Peru.

Undeniably I was glad to leave "luscious Lima" as it is called in Mathew Parris' novel *Inka Kola*, this city of contrasts: poverty and wealth, colonial and modern, pristine plazas and neglected facades, hides under the constant mist and smog that clings to the Pacific coastline. A short flight with LanPeru takes you to the welcomingly fresh altiplano and Lake Titicaca. The world's highest navigable lake at 3,900 metres, is home to the Aymara and Quechua people. They have ancient beliefs in Mother Earth and the Sun and Moon; temples from their pre-Inca days still survive on the Islands of Taquile and Amantaní. I would recommend taking a whole day out on the lake and visiting the Uros Islands, which are made of totora reeds and float on the surface. The Uros Indians hunt, fish and live off the lake, but nowadays they have intermarried with the Quechua Indians and are moving away from their traditional lifestyles. You will continue on to the islands of Taquile or Amantaní to witness the peaceful tranquil communities that



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live in semi-isolation from modern society.

After a day on the lake the best way to travel to Cuzco from here is to take the excellent Peru Rail train. A fantastic journey lasting about ten hours at an average altitude of 3,500m. You pass locals selling their produce and farmers herding their llamas. The highest pass, La Raya, is 4,200m and surrounded by snow capped peaks. The train brings you into the station at the end of a long but well worthwhile day, to the

famous city in the foothills of the Andes. Cuzco was the ceremonial centre of the Inca Empire, a vast and ruthless culture that once spread from Colombia down to Argentina. Modern day Cuzco remains a centre for travellers from all over the world, a mecca for those embarking on the Inca Trail but also for those wishing to arrive at Machu Picchu by less strenuous means. A happy medium is to do the KM104 trek which is a day's hiking to Machu Picchu passing the stunning ruins of Wiña Wayna and arriving at the Sun Gate (Intipunku) from where you have a magnificent view down onto the citadel.

Finding things to do in Cuzco is never a problem. The city is full of museums, plazas, churches and is surrounded by Inca ruins. There are also plenty of bars, cafes and



restaurants to relax in after a busy day's sightseeing. I stayed at the Novotel Casa Real hotel which is a perfect combination of the past and the present. It is a beautifully restored 16th century colonial Spanish building with a lovely courtyard where you can sit and enjoy an aperitif before dinner.

The Sacred Valley stretches between Cuzco and Machu Picchu and is definitely worth at least a day to explore. The market towns of Pisac and Ollantaytambo provide you with the opportunity to buy colourful handicrafts and witness the locals selling their produce from the surrounding countryside and Inca terraces. The train takes you through the Urubamba valley all the way from Ollantaytambo to Aguas Calientes, a small town in the cloud forest that hides the most famous Inca ruin in Peru. Machu Picchu will not fail to inspire you with awe and wonder as you see it appear from nowhere in the morning mist.

From Cuzco I headed to the Amazon and only a few minutes after taking off from Cuzco airport the

scenery changes to snow capped peaks. The giant summits of the Andes cut a clear divide between the



THE NOVOTEL CASA REAL PROVIDES AN ATMOSPHERIC PLACE TO STAY IN CUZCO.

highlands and the never ending Amazon jungle. As the slopes fall away oxbow lakes and muddy rivers are visible from the plane. You enter a different world in just a brief flight. Puerto Maldonado is cut out of this seemingly impenetrable jungle, and

after two more hours by motorised canoe you arrive at Posada Amazonas. Built in an open plan design from natural materials this jungle lodge is an eco-friendly venture between the local community of Infierno and Rain Forest Expeditions. Your room is open on one side facing the jungle, no windows, no doors, nothing to separate you from the surrounding life source, the Amazon rainforest. There is a full daily programme of excursions into the rainforest to view the amazing flora and fauna, including the six foot long river otters which live close to the lodge. My lasting memory will be of looking out over the seemingly infinite forest canopy from a high viewing platform.

Returning to a place can often be disappointment, I am happy to report that this is not the case with Peru.

Travel File

Prices for a 14 night tour to Peru range from £1995 to £2995 depending on hotels used and itinerary. Please contact Rhian or Carolyn for further details on 01869 276 210.

