

Gauging enthusiasm

Mike Foreman, an Audley client and railway enthusiast, shares his experiences on Peru's rail network.



Machu Picchu



Taquile Islanders

I am unashamedly interested in railways and travel by train at any opportunity, so the chance to visit Peru was not to be missed. Living in England, where railways for the most part are fenced off from their surroundings and the Health and Safety Executive appear to control our every move and action, I was interested in travelling to Latin America to see how other countries live and cope without such strictures. The local Audley guides in Lima and Cuzco had been well briefed and went out of their way to ensure that every opportunity was taken to indulge my interest, including a visit to a children's playground in Cuzco to view a British-built steam engine that had once worked the three-foot gauge railway from Cuzco to Aguas Calientes. Nowadays, the trains are diesel, well-cared for and smartly turned out in Perurail blue livery, but because of the altitude and resulting lack of oxygen it requires diesel engines of twice the horsepower of the old steam engines to do the same job. The line is still the same

though, tortuously climbing the hillside out of Cuzco in a series of switchbacks (reversals) to gain height, affording at every turn views of the town and valley below. It is the ideal way to see the splendour of the scenery as the line reaches the watershed and descends into the Urubamba valley. After Ollantaytambo the road peters out and the only means of further progress to Machu Picchu is through the Urubamba gorge, unless you want to walk the Inca trail. However, the railway engineers managed to make a path for the track along the edge of this gorge, cutting through rocky outcrops and twisting around corner after corner, allowing glimpses of Inca terraces and the river tumbling below, until you reach the end of your journey at Aguas Calientes and the unforgettable Inca citadel of Machu Picchu.

From Cuzco's other station you can take the 8:00am train and head south on Perurail's standard gauge line to Puno, which lies 235 miles away on the shore of Lake Titicaca. This is a journey of 10 hours with nothing to do but watch life go by, absorbing the views of the Andes from the open balcony on the rear carriage. The start is gentle enough as you begin at 3,300 metres in Cuzco, descending briefly into the Urubamba valley and then following the river, climbing gradually through small villages and past fields worked by oxen-pulled wooden ploughs until you reach the market town of Sicuani. Here some of the keen stallholders will have had to move their stalls off the line to let the train go by. After Sicuani the train really starts climbing in earnest, until

finally it reaches the summit at La Raya (4,313 metres) and pauses briefly to allow passengers off to stretch their legs, make purchases at the trackside market or just view the train. From here the line descends across the Andean altiplano until reaching Juliaca, another town that stops to allow the train through the middle of its wide main street. The last hour of the journey to Puno (3,827 metres) is dead straight across land that used to be part of the Titicaca lakebed, before finally winding around the edge of the lake and through the gates into Puno station just as dusk is falling.

Recently I've heard that the spectacular 'Three Miles High' Lima to Huancayo line is again running a regular passenger service, which takes you up 21 switchbacks, through numerous tunnels and over dozens of bridges and viaducts, finally reaching the highest standard gauge railway station in the world at Galera at 4,782 metres. After passing Ticlio at 4,829 metres the line descends to Oroya in the central Andean plain at a mere 3,000 metres, continuing through Jauja to Huancayo. Special steam charter trains over part of the route are also planned. For stunning scenery and the opportunity to see the awesome feats of the Victorian railway builders, one has to go and see Peru oneself. I certainly feel the need for a return visit to this delightful country.

WEB PLUS

www.audley.co.uk/features/perurail
Suggested rail itineraries in Peru and more images



FACT FILE

A 14-night trip to Peru, including the Puno to Cuzco and Cuzco to Machu Picchu journeys, costs from £2,225 per person, based on two people travelling. This includes all flights, transfers, accommodation and tours. Please contact our Peru specialists on 01869 276 210 for more details.

