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ELLE TRAVEL

INTO PERU

Susan Ward Davies satiates her appetite for adventure amid the wild extremes of Peru



Top: A papier-mâché cow at Titilaka Hotel. Above: A kayaking trip to the Aqua Amazon

We're calling it: 2017 will be the year of the Attention Deficit Destination (ADD). It's travel for people who are so busy they need holidays that are like tapas: lots of bits combining into one delicious whole. Peru is the perfect ADD, and here's why.

The country curls around Brazil's vast Amazonas state, bordering Ecuador and Colombia to the north and Bolivia and Chile to the south, with those extremes of landscape and climate in between. In two weeks, I went from Lima's artsy Barranco to spotting anacondas on the Amazon, dodging llamas in Machu Picchu, cycling through the Sacred Valley, culture-tripping in Cusco, flying over the Nazca Lines, clambering up sand mountains, and checking out floating reed villages on Lake Titicaca. I even squeezed in a precious hour – yes, just the one – by the beach.

THE RIVER

First up, the Amazon, because this is Peru and you are here for adventure.



Above: Peru's beautiful mountain landscape

Hanging out in Lima straight away is too samey for city folk needing that culture-shock adrenaline rush.

A two-hour flight north takes you from warm-ish Lima (12-24C) to steamy Iquitos (32C), near to where the Aqua Amazon (aquaexpeditions.com) is moored. This luxury 12-cabin river expedition vessel plies the mighty Amazon from Iquitos to where the two main tributaries meet (Ucayali and the Marañón, the principal source of the Amazon). That's a three-night/four-day, food- and wildlife-fest done in stately style in cabins with huge windows so you can watch the silvery grey water and fishing boats scudding past.

Smaller boats take us into channels off the main river and it gets very *Heart Of Darkness*, nosing its way through reeds and giant water lilies, as we duck under vines and spider monkeys swing overhead. And it's noisy: crickets chirruping, tree frogs calling, monkeys chattering. We 'ooh' and 'ahh' at yellow-headed caracaras,



Left: Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel. Above right: The seafront Hotel Paracas

crimson-crested woodpeckers and caimans (a type of crocodile) slithering down banks. The food is as exotic as the wildlife: river fish with taro root purée, heart of palm salad, bream ceviche. Peruvians are good at food.

We trek through the jungle, meet kids at a village school, fish for piranhas, squeal at anacondas and pink dolphins, hold a boa constrictor and get too close to a tarantula. By the time we disembark, we'd gone 'full Attenborough' and would need something pretty special to top it.

MACHU PICCHU

If you had seen us swigging champagne as we reached Machu Picchu, you would have assumed we were celebrating the end of the gruelling two-to-four-day trek to get here – but you'd have been wrong. We didn't take the softies' route (a train from Ollantaytambo, then a bus), but we did only hike up from the little town of Aguas Calientes five miles below, a kind of Machu Picchu base camp full of trekkers and porters. But it was hot. And steep. And the increasing altitude (up to 2,400m) makes you pant like a sumo wrestler on a treadmill. Zigzagging up the rocky footpath for 90 minutes is undoubtedly worth it, with the valley views getting more epic at every turn and clouds parting to



reveal craggy mountains. However you get here, the main event is Machu Picchu itself, an imposing 15th-century Inca citadel put on the map in 1911 by American explorer Hiram Bingham III. It may be one of the world's most recognisable landmarks, but seeing it for real is still a stop-you-in-your-tracks moment. Impressive temples and warehouses are made with massive stones so tightly fitted together, without mortar, that you couldn't slide the finest blade between them. Bucket list stuff, indeed.

The path down is as tricky as the ascent until it flattens out along the river. Heading upstream leads you back to the town of Aguas Calientes, a cluster of stacked houses on a steep hillside. Here, you can drink coca tea (for altitude sickness) in tiny cafes, wallow in the municipal hot springs or return to the Inkatererra Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel (inkatererra.com) and lounge in rock springs among orchids and casitas. You leave on the glass-roofed PeruRail (perurail.com) train that winds its way alongside the Urubamba River: 90 minutes of mountains and grassland slowly darkening in the twilight, until you reach Ollantaytambo, the gateway to the Sacred Valley.

THE SACRED VALLEY OF THE INCAS

With a name like that, you'd expect some awesome scenery – and the Sacred Valley, which runs nearly 40 miles through the Andes between Cusco and Machu Picchu, doesn't disappoint with its miles of undulating hills. In the middle of this, 16 miles east of the pretty village of Ollantaytambo (women in tall hats and full skirts; sun-leathered men drinking *chicha*, corn alcohol) is the hillside Inkatererra Hacienda Urubamba (inkatererra.com), which looks like an Inca settlement, lights twinkling from its 24 casitas. Bedrooms have log fires (it's chilly at night), massive bathrooms and a cosy hunting-lodge feel.



Top left: The glass-roofed PeruRail train. Above: Reed islands

'WE FISH FOR PIRANHAS, SQUEAL AT ANACONDAS AND GET TOO CLOSE TO A TARANTULA'



Above: Susan trekking through the Amazon rainforest



'TITICACA IS THE WORLD'S HIGHEST NAVIGABLE BODY OF WATER, AND THE ALTITUDE CAN MAKE YOU FEEL AS IF YOU'RE BREATHING THROUGH A SOCK'

The main building's glass front showcases the valley; order a pisco sour and watch thousands of stars hanging over the valley.

Mountain-biking is the best way to see the valley, so they'll drive you from the hacienda to a mostly flat two-hour circuit. The scenery makes you forget you're out of puff as you pedal along unmade roads, past agave plants and fields of corn, quinoa and potatoes (Peru has 3,800 types), through villages of faded white-stone houses where women in cowboy hats sit shucking corn. Then it's back to the hacienda for exquisite Pumahuanca trout and purple potato purée.

CUSCO

Around 25 miles south of the hacienda is Cusco. It's on every traveller's checklist, usually before Macchu Picchu, as that is nearly 1,000m lower than Cusco, where the altitude (3,400m) can literally take your breath away. Hotels have room-service oxygen;

10 minutes should sort you out if you're feeling dizzy, or just fancy a buzz. You need to be on form in Cusco because it's a total culture-fest: Inca temples, museums, markets, cobbled hills to climb, women in richly coloured national dress with bowler hats – you won't do it justice if you aren't firing on all cylinders. And when you've reached sensory overload, you'll need a hotel like the Inkaterria La Casona (inkaterria.com): 11 suites in a 16th-century mansion overlooking a peaceful square.

THE ANDEAN EXPLORER

I love trains: the rocking motion, the clunkety-clunk sounds, the scenery flashing by and vignettes of life glimpsed



through backlit doorways. The Andean Explorer (perurail.com) is a peach; run by Belmond, formerly Orient Express, you know it's going to be cushy. If you're travelling alone, like me, they'll rearrange the armchairs – yes, armchairs – so you have your own table. You'll be treated like a duchess for the whole 10 hours, with three-course meals (salmon and quinoa salad, crab cakes) and even afternoon tea.

You'll pass wild mountainscapes and heathland – all beautifully bleak, a kind of Peruvian *Wuthering Heights* – best photographed from the open end of the observation car. The train stops at the highest point, La Raya – which, at 4,312m, gives you barely enough oxygen to let you check out the alpaca sweaters at the station market and peep into its tiny chapel. As the train winds down into Puno, the stop-off point for Lake Titicaca, it slows to walking pace so market traders can move their wares from the tracks. From here, it is a 45-minute taxi ride to the Titilaka Hotel (mrandmrsmith.com/luxury-hotels/titilaka) right on the lake.

LAKE TITICACA

It's early in the morning. I'm drinking prickly pear juice – deep red, like beetroot – eating quinoa porridge and looking out over the lake where Titicaca grebes (a type of non-flying duck) paddle through the reeds. This is the world's highest navigable body of water and at 3,810m, the altitude can still make you feel as if you're breathing through a sock.

It is a strange, beautiful, otherworldly place, made all the more surreal by staying here, in the Titilaka Hotel: unremarkable from the outside but super-stylish and full of art within. The lobby looks like a gallery, with painted papier-mâché cows and mid-century-style furniture. The 18 suites are contemporary, with huge windows overlooking the lake's inky waters. By day you can borrow bikes and kayaks, or take

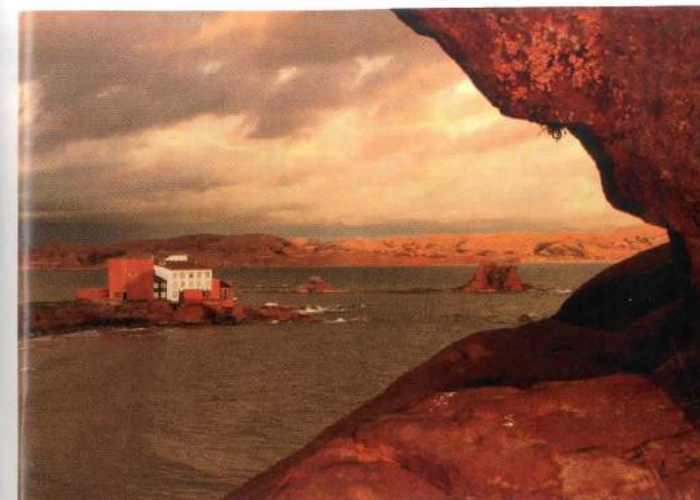


Above: A dramatic coastline view of Lake Titicaca



Clockwise from top: Kayaks dotting the Amazon coast, Titicaca seen from the Titilaka Hotel, and Machu Picchu

Photography: John & Catherine Davies. Richard James Taylor, Susan Ward Davies.



a boat to the islands of the pre-Inca Uros tribe. The tennis court-sized islands are made of totora reeds and soil blocks; on some you can stay the night. Island trips are big business in Puno, but the Titilaka takes its guests where no one else goes.

By day, the sun is fiercely hot; back at the Titilaka at nightfall, the braziers are lit and you curl up in alpaca blankets and wish you weren't leaving in the morning.

LIMA

At first sight you may wonder what's to love about this sprawling, traffic-choked metropolis. But that would be before you'd bar- and gallery-hopped in Barranco, watched surfers from the promenade in leafy Miraflores or spent a morning at MALI (Museum of Art of Lima). Then you'll see a city fizzing with art, food and design.

There are more world-class chefs in Lima than you can shake a quinoa frittata at, like Virgilio Martínez Véliz whose Central has been voted best restaurant in Latin America for two years in a row.

Photographer Mario Testino is one of the many ex-pats drawn back to their newly optimistic homeland. His charity art foundation MATE is a gallery in a colonial house in Barranco. On show are his photos (Princess Diana, Kate Moss, Naomi Campbell) and his Alta Moda Collection of Peruvians in traditional costume.

Testino's friend, Susana de la Puente Wiese, owns the coolest hotel in town, Arts

Boutique Hotel B (hotelb.pe), an elegant colonial mansion with 18 rooms. Her sister, Lucia, has the gallery next door, lending eye-catching pieces to the hotel. And when you see a black tie laid out on your crisp duvet, you're not in the wrong room – it's their witty take on a 'do not disturb' sign.

THE NAZCA LINES

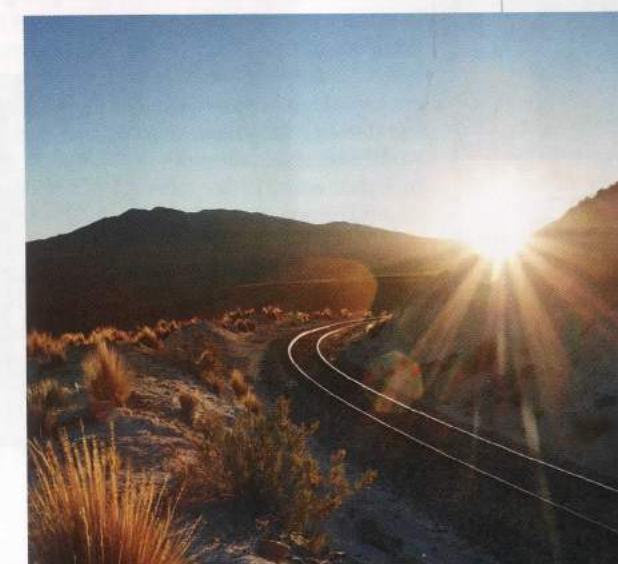
Time for one more trip? The Nazca Lines are huge pre-Incan drawings depicting shapes and wildlife, covering 50 miles of the Nazca desert 250 miles south of Lima. Created between 500BC and 500AD, they can only be seen from the air, so why they were made is a mystery.

Testino took Kate Moss here in 2010 when she came to see his MALI exhibition. They, like me, stayed in the seafront Hotel Paracas (statwoodhotels.com) as it's near the airfield from where you fly over the lines. But before Nazca, there's still time to drive 45 miles south to the amazing sand-dune oasis at Huacachina. A small lake is surrounded by mountains of sand, which you can scale on dune buggies, or climb up, sinking to your knees in soft sand with every sweaty, laborious step. At the top you are rewarded with 360° views of pale gold landscape and the thrill of leap-running back to the bottom. And that was Peru: a lot of exhilarating moments packed into one epic country. The perfect Attention Deficit Destination. ■

British Airways, ba.com, has direct flights from Heathrow to Lima from £653 return. Audley Travel, audleytravel.com, offers bespoke trips to Peru. Visit PromPeru (peru.travel/en-uk). For more on this trip, visit elleuk.com/travel



Above: Peru's clear blue skies. Below: The sun sets on board the Andean Explorer



Top: A view from the carriages of the Andean Explorer. Above: Hotel B in Barranco, Lima. Right: Inkaterria Hacienda Urubamba

