



HERE'S WHY YOU SHOULD ADD PERU TO YOUR BUCKET LIST

ADVENTURE DOESN'T DISSIPATE BETWEEN THE WILD EXTREMES



BY SUSAN WARD DAVIES

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115



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 like a cashew nut around Brazil's vast Amazonas state, bordering Ecuador and Colombia to the north and Bolivia and Chile to the south, with all those extremes of landscape and climate in between.

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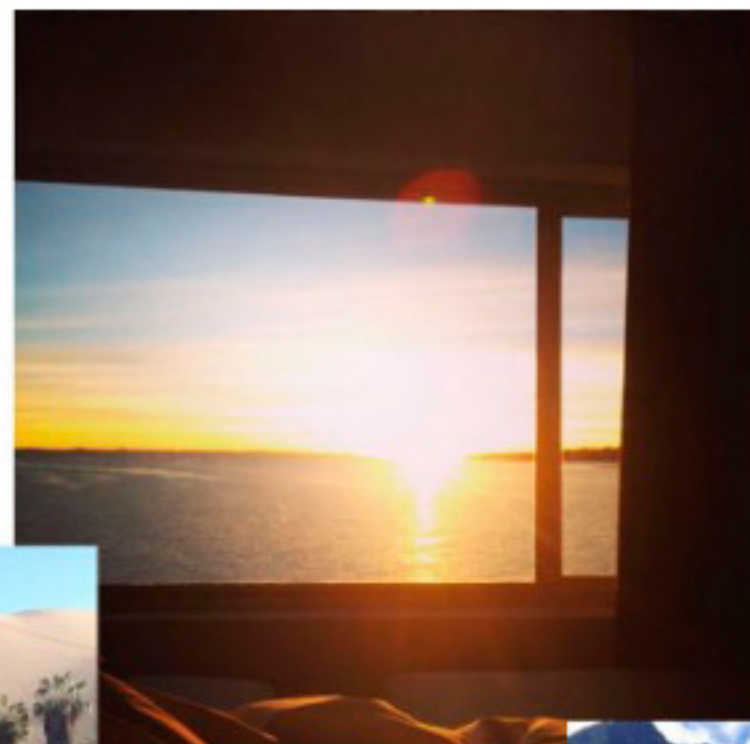
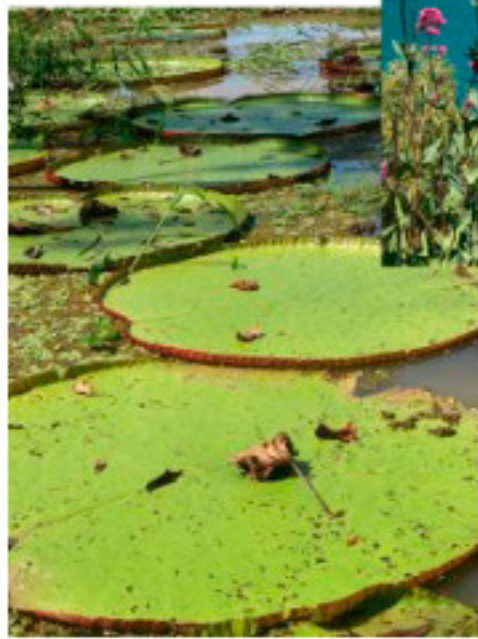


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In two weeks, I went from hanging out in Lima's artsy Barranco to spotting anacondas on the Amazon, dodging llamas in Machu Picchu, cycling through the Sacred Valley, culture-tripping in Cusco, flying over the Nazca Lines, clambering up sand mountains in a desert oasis, and checking out floating reed villages on Lake Titicaca, with lot of spectacular road and train miles in between. And I even squeezed in a precious hour – yes, just the one – by the beach.



SUSAN WARD DAVIES

1| THE RIVER

First up, the Amazon, because this is Peru and you are here for Adventure with a capital A, and just 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](#) 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. The boat is a dream, with stylish, cleverly designed cabins where you can magic all your stuff out of sight, and a huge window so you can lie in bed watching the silvery grey water, and the occasional barge or fishing boat, scudding past.

Days are structured: alarm call at 6.30, breakfast at 7am (poached eggs, fruit, muesli), then off in small groups in 10-seater open boats, which head up river towards the Brazilian border. We're near Colombia here, too, so it feels like we could be travelling along some kind of drugs corridor (apparently not, we're told, although a boat nearby was raided by bandits, so it's not completely danger-free).

As we head into little channels off the main river, it gets very *Heart of Darkness*, the boat nosing its way through reeds and giant waterlilies, as we duck under overhanging lianas, watching spider monkeys Tarzaning overhead. And it's noisy: tree frogs calling, crickets chirruping, monkeys chattering, sloths just – well - just hanging around. We ooh and ah at the wildlife, as the men in the next boat have a bit of a lens-off with their paparazzo-sized equipment every time our brilliant guide, Julio, spots a yellow-headed cara cara, a crimson-crested woodpecker, or a cayman slithering down a bank.

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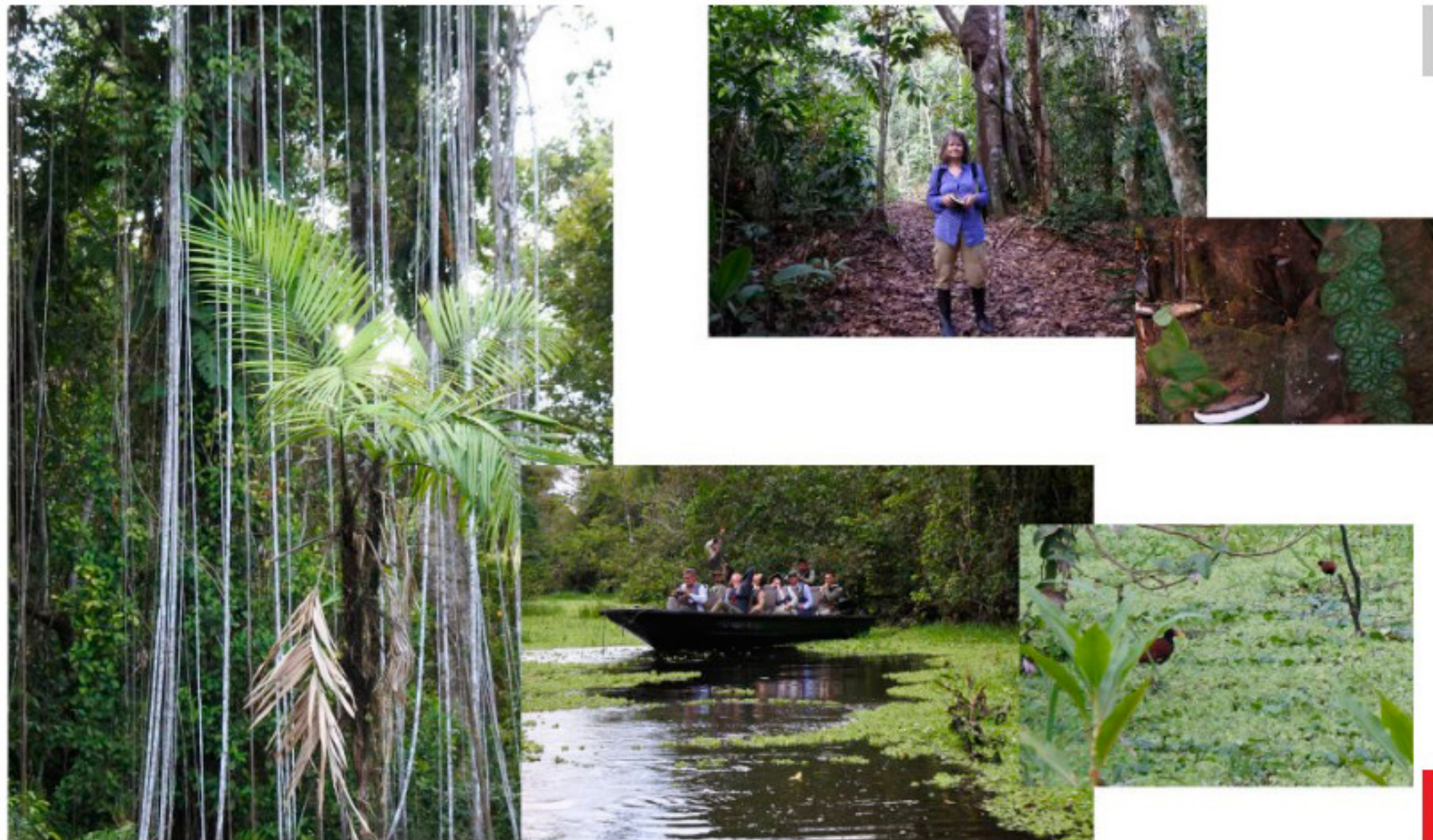
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It is a genius mix of adventure (we travel everywhere with a paramedic, 'just in case,' they say), and gluttony, with the food in the elegant dining room, as exotic as the wildlife (river fish with tara root puree, heart of palm salad, bream ceviche). Peruvians, as we will discover, are very good at food.



You get to trek through the jungle, meet kids at a village school and fish for piranhas (gratifyingly easy to catch), and – if you're lucky, you'll see anacondas and pink (really pink) dolphins, hold a boa constrictor and get too close to a tarantula. By the time you're disembarking, you'll feel you've gone the full David Attenborough, and you'll need something pretty special to top it.



Susan Ward Davies in the Amazon Rainforest

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2| MACHU PICCHU

If you had seen us swigging a bottle of champagne as we reached Machu Picchu, you would have assumed we were celebrating the end of the gruelling two - four-day trek to get here. But you would have been wrong. We didn't take the complete softies route (train from Ollaytantambo and then bus), but we did only hike up from the little town of Aguas Calientes (hot springs), 9 kms below, a kind of Machu Picchu base camp full of trekkers and porters. But it was hot. And steep. And the increasing altitude (going from 1880m to 2400m) makes you pant like a sumo wrestler on a treadmill. Even just zigzagging up the narrow, rocky footpath for 90 minutes – with the views across the valley getting more and more epic at every turn: clouds parting to reveal craggy mountains, splashes of colour from mountain plants, the lush exoticness of the tropical forest all around, you can imagine the real deal. It would be this but multiplied, with wild camping thrown in to add a touch of Bear Grylls to the experience.

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



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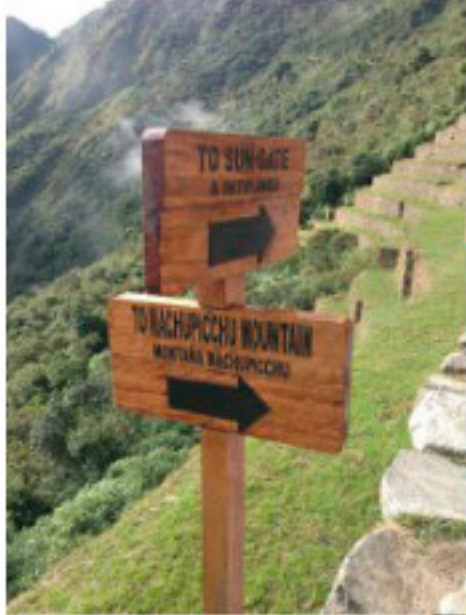
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But however you get here, the main event is Machu Picchu itself, an imposing 15th century Inca citadel, hidden away in the Andes and put on the world map when American explorer Hiram Bingham ¹¹¹ stumbled across it in 1911.

The image may be one of the most recognisable in the world, but seeing it for real is still a stop-in-your-tracks moment. Even if it is full of tourists (only 2500 let in daily), and you have to dodge the occasional wild llama, there is no escaping the majesty of it all: the neat terraces, the impressive palaces, plazas and terraces, made with massive stones so tightly fitted together, without mortar, you couldn't slide the finest blade between them. Bucket list stuff indeed.



The path down is almost as tricky as the ascent, until it widens and flattens out along the river. Head upstream and it will lead you back to the small vertiginous town of Aguas Calientes, a cluster of stacked houses on a steep hillside built around the cascading river. Here you can potter around the hiking gear shops, drink coca tea (for altitude sickness) in tiny pavement cafes, check out the textiles in the market, buy plastic ponchos (for a pound) for the inevitable downpours and wallow in the municipal hot springs. These involve a steep climb to reach smallish, tiled, communal pools; far better to go back to rustic eco lodge, [Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel](#), and lounge in their Garden-of -Eden-like natural rock springs surrounded by orchids and the hotel's 81 casitas. Or check out the adorable rescued spectacled bears, Pepe and Quina, in the hotel's sanctuary.



On the way to Machu Picchu, Peru

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And when you leave, it is on the ornate, glass-roofed, [PeruRail](#) train, that winds its way on the single track alongside the Urubamba river: 90 minutes of mountains and grassland slowly darkening in the twilight, till you get to Ollaytantambo, the gateway to the Sacred Valley.

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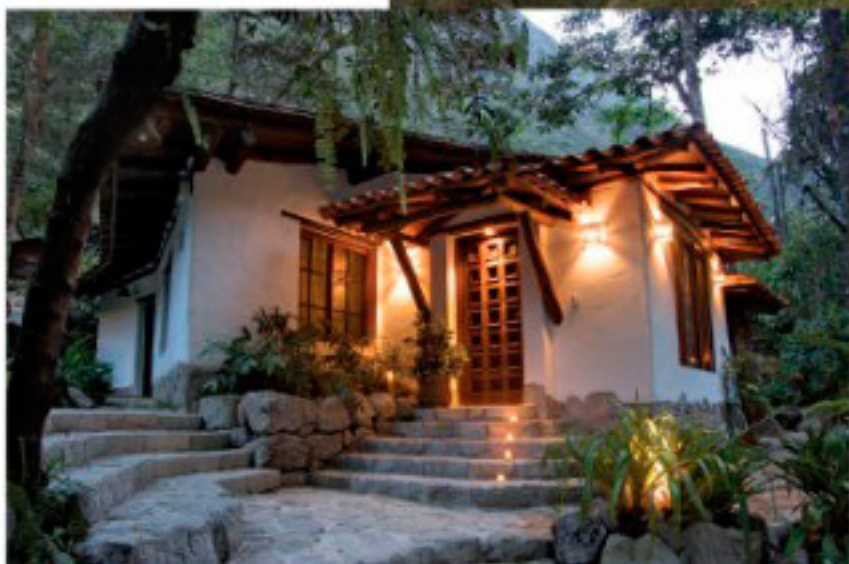
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[Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo](#), Doubles from around £200, half board, inc guided excursions within the property.

3| THE SACRED VALLEY OF THE INCAS

With a name like that, you'd expect some pretty awesome scenery, and the Sacred Valley, which runs 60kms through the Andes between Cusco and Machu Picchu, doesn't disappoint, with its mile upon mile of undulating hills. In the middle of all this, 16 miles east of the pretty village of Ollaytantambo (women in tall hats, thick blankets knotted like shawls and full skirts, sun-leathered men drinking chicha -corn alcohol- in the main square), is the Inkaterra [Hacienda Urubamba](#), which looks like some kind of Inca settlement, with lights twinkling from 24 casitas spread around the hillside. Bedrooms have log fires (it's chilly at night), massive bathrooms and a cosy hunting lodge feel. In the main building, with its glass frontage showcasing the valley, order a pisco sour, flop onto the oversized sofas strewn with Peruvian textile throws, and watch thousands of stars hanging over the valley.



The best way to see it all is by mountain bike. It is harder cycling at altitude, but they'll drive you from the Hacienda to a mostly flat two-hour circuit. The wild scenery makes you forget you're out of puff, as you pedal along dusty, unmade roads, past agave plants and fields of corn, quinoa and potatoes (Peru has 3,800 types), where men follow oxen-drawn ploughs, and on through tiny villages of faded whitewashed stone houses, where women in cowboy hats, sit shucking corn. And when you're done, it's back to the Hacienda for exquisite Pumahuanca trout, purple potato puree, and pastel do choclo (corn pasty) from Chef Rafael Casin's creative earth-to-table menu.

The Sacred Valley - as magical as it sounds.

[Inkaterra Hacienda Urubamba](#), doubles from £340, B&B



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4| CUSCO

Forty kms south of the Hacienda, pretty Cusco is high up (nearly 3400 m) in the Andes. It's on every traveller's checklist, usually before Macchu Picchu, as that is nearly 1000m lower than Cusco, whose altitude can literally take your breath away. Hotels have room service oxygen, and about 10 minutes should sort you out if you're feeling dizzy -or just fancy a bit of a buzz.



A market in Cusco, Peru

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You need to be on form in Cusco because it is a total culture fest: full of Inca temples, ancient convents, massive plazas, museums, galleries, markets (textiles a-go-go), cobbled hills to climb, women in richly-coloured national dress with bowler hats, and a zillion other instagram opportunities, and you just won't do it justice if you aren't firing on all cylinders.

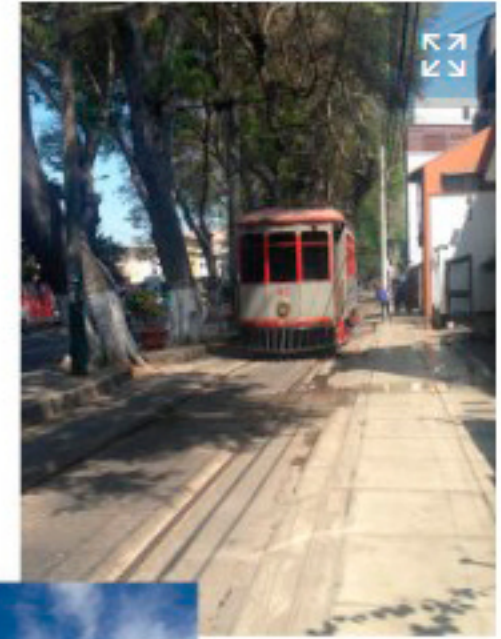
And when you've reached sensory overload, you need a really gorgeous hotel. My favourite was the [Inkaterra La Casona](#), with 11 suites in an old 16th century mansion, with shutters that open up onto a peaceful square, a shady courtyard, elegant stone pillars, but plenty of 21st century comforts like underfloor heating and free standing baths.

[Inkaterra.com](#) Suites from around £299, B&B



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I love trains: the rocking motion, the clunkety clunk, the lurching walks along corridors, the constantly changing scenery whizzing by and vignettes of life glimpsed through backlit doorways. The [Andean Explorer](#) 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, complete with tablecloth and window lamp. And they will treat you like a duchess for the whole 10 hours, with three-course meals (salmon and quinoa salad; crab cakes), and even afternoon tea.



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The Explore is aimed at (and priced for) tourists, so not exactly a 'local' experience, but you pass through plenty of 'real' Peru, 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 4312 m, makes your lungs feel like colanders, leaving just enough oxygen to let you check out the alpaca sweaters at the station market, and poke your head into its tiny ornate chapel.

As the train finally 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 as the train trundles through, laying them right back down when it's passed. From here, it is a 45-minute taxi ride on bumpy, unlit roads to the [Titilaka Hotel](#), right on the lake.