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Boats, buses and bites: Why every traveller to Peru should choose 'slow travel'



Miranda Larbi Saturday 18 Jan 2020 12:33 pm



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We made some good drinking pals with the local lads (Picture: Miranda Larbi)

There's nothing quite like being incarcerated on a metal cargo ship with hardly any running water for six days to test your patience.

Throw into that scenario the fact that it's 35 degrees, you and your bunkpal have both got the sh*ts and the only thing available to eat is boiled white rice, and you've got some insight into the Amazonian trip I took last month.

I travelled around Peru – the slow way.

Because the flight over is so long and expensive, I decided that once I'd gotten up to Iquitos, I wouldn't take another plane until it was time to return to the UK.

Call it **flygskam** ('flight shame', as the Swedes call it), or call it just being a miser, it seemed wrong to want to travel to a country so famed for its

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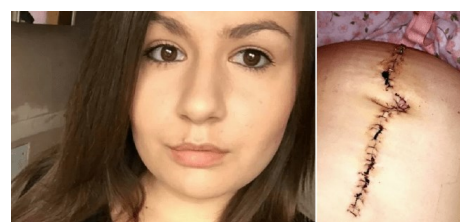
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natural beauty, only to fly past it in a carbon-pumping fug.

Slow travel is all about enjoying the journey as much as the destination while doing as little damage to the planet as possible. A **2019 Guardian analysis** found that taking a long-haul flight can generate more carbon emissions than the average person produces in an entire year. But it's not just lengthy trips that are causing chaos; a trip from London to Rome carries a carbon footprint of 234kg of CO2 per passenger; that's more than is generated by the populations of 17 countries a year.

Many travellers choose to fly between cities in Peru because it's such a vast country and the flights are relatively cheap (around £42 from Iquitos to Cusco). People don't necessarily have the time or want to 'waste' time on travelling when they could be **taking ayahuasca in the jungle** or climbing Machu Picchu. But given that Iquitos (northern jungle region) is roughly the same kind of distance from Cusco (southern mountains) as Rome is from London, there's an environmental price to pay for that impatience.

Travelling with Metro.co.uk's intrepid illustrator Ella for most of the trip, we set our intention: to get from Iquitos to Cusco to Lima without taking a plane.

The first step involved taking a boat down from Iquitos in the north east, down to Pucallpa. We were told that it'd take five days on a slow cargo ship or two days on the quick boat.

While a two-day trip sounded much better, those little speed boats don't have cabins so you're forced to sleep in a hammock in the main belly of the boat – with no lockers or storage for your valuables. Suffice to say that as two freelance journo's carrying equipment, we had to plump for the slower but safer option.

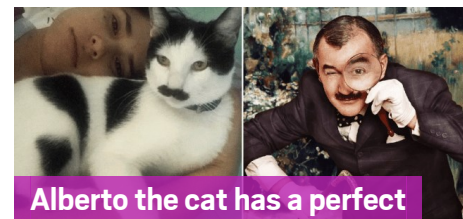


Before half of Peru boarded the boat, our floor had just a couple of families (Picture: Miranda Larbi)

So for about £40 each, we bought two all-in-inclusive tickets for the Henry III boat and off we went. The first two days – fine. 35 degree sun, time to relax, bags of food we'd brought onboard with us.

And then things turned. More people got on board. The water started to get cut off in the middle of the day. We ran out of our own snacks and had nothing to fortify the daily three meals of boiled white rice (the veggie option – meat eaters had chicken).

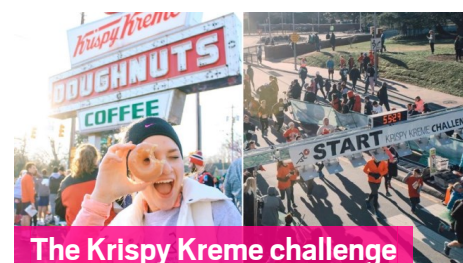
Oh, and then we got sick and started pooing our guts out as it became apparent that the boat would be delayed an extra day due to getting stuck on a sandbank. By the time we reached Pulcallpa, we were about a stone lighter



Alberto the cat has a perfect Poirot style moustache

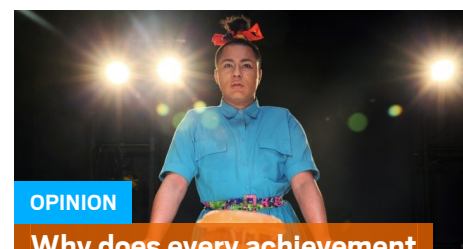
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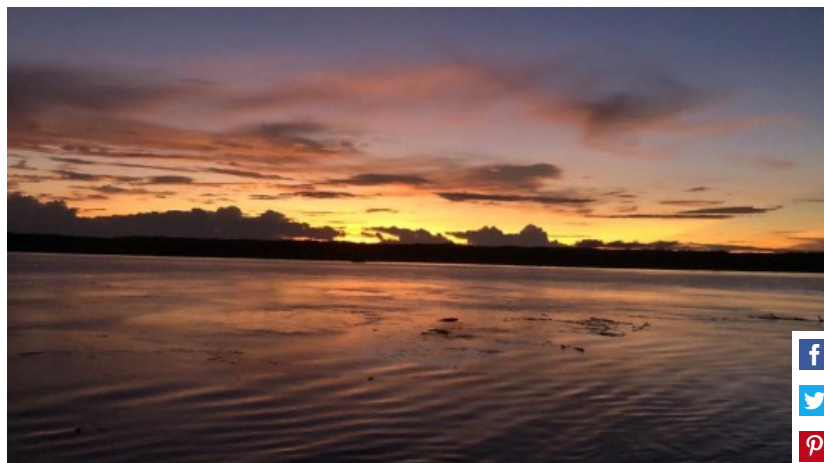
'Travis Alabanza is the first Black trans person to sell out a show at Southbank Centre', one reaction to my show read online. »

and almost delirious with cabin fever.

But on the other hand, we made some great friends on board with people we'd never have otherwise met.

The boat passes loads of little villages and we spent one afternoon drinking beers with some local lads on the top deck, discussing their claim that Peru is the best country due to the fact that it has more women than men.

I spent a good hour a day chatting to the supervisor of the ship on all kinds of topics, which gave my Spanish a really good workout. Kids came to sneak a peek at arch-Gringa Ella every time she was resting in our room, which provided great entertainment for both me and them.

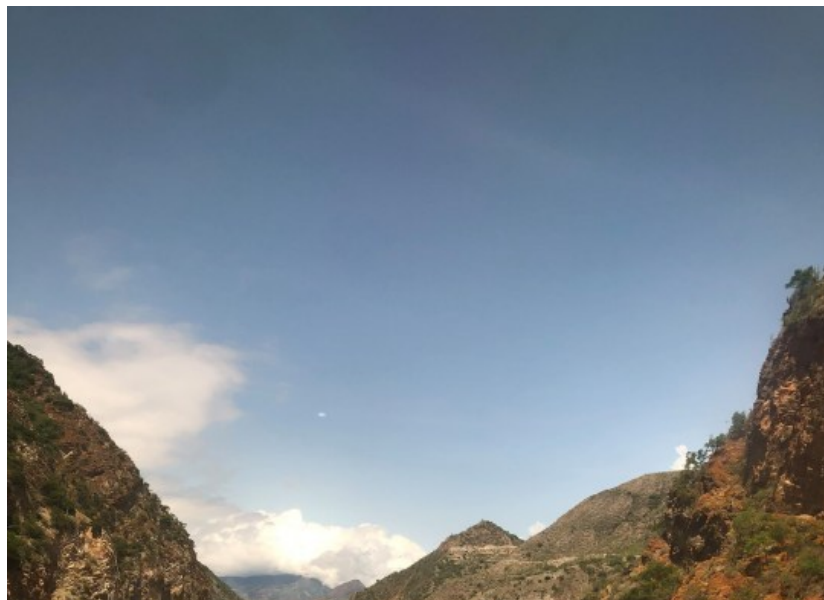


And saw incredible sunsets every evening (Picture: Miranda Larbi)

And of course, we saw some really gorgeous landscapes; I've never seen sunsets like the ones we watched on the Amazon. Every night, flaming red skies gave out to a blanket of twinkling stars for as far as the eye could see. We spent our afternoons watching pink dolphins jump in the wash and great swathes of palms sway from the banks.

After a day in Pucallpa (where we feasted like queens on peanut butter and fruit juice), we took a 24-hour bus across to Lima, before catching a slightly longer bus down to Cusco.

Forget Megabus, these buses are luxury. We're talking seats that recline to 160 degrees, with dinner and breakfast served on board (again, if you're veggie, ignore that and bring your own). Oh, and they're much cheaper than flying. You can get a midday bus from Lima to Cusco for about £24... while a flight with Latam will set you back £100. Sure, it takes longer but the views are worth it. You'll see mountain gorges, rivers, incredible heathland that you'd otherwise pay to see – all from the comfort of your padded seat.





Hold onto your stomach and settle down for some spectacular views from the bus (Picture: Miranda Larbi)



(Picture: Miranda Larbi)

And once you're in Cusco, it's incredibly easy to move about in a low-carbon manner, thanks to the proliferation of 'collectivos' – minivans that refuse to move until every seat is filled.

We spent a while in the Sacred Valley, going between Cusco, Pisac, Ollantambo and Machu Picchu and managed to get about mainly on these buses which cost about £1 to go half an hour, and then taking the Inka Rail up to Machu Picchu (possibly the best train ride of my life – the views and food are simply incredible).





Take the Inka Rail train up to Aguas Calientes (Picture: Miranda Larbi)



It's almost as gorgeous on the inside as the landscape is outside (Picture: Miranda Larbi)





(Picture: Miranda Larbi)

As for lodging, in the jungle, we stayed at an eco ayahuasca retreat (as green as it's possible to be, with minimal electricity etc) and hostels but once we got to the Sacred Valley, we had two nights of luxury at two of Inkaterra's eco lodges.

Inkaterra Hacienda Urubamba is located in the middle of the Sacred Valley – a jump and a skip (read: two colectivos) away from Cusco centre and has everything you'd want from an eco-paradise.

Huge baskets of fragrant lavender are in each room as a 'Do Not Disturb' sign, while waste paper bins have notes inside them reminding guests to think about what they're chucking away.

Our rooms looked out onto breathtaking views of the valley, surrounded by mountains.

Sprawling veg gardens (everything ends up in the kitchen) nestle next to bee-friendly meadows of wildflowers which you can explore on your own during the day or via a candle-lit twilight stroll with a local guide who'll introduce you to two permanent residents: the hotel's alpacas.





(Picture: Miranda Larbi)



(Picture: Miranda Larbi)

But if you want to see what true eco-luxury looks like, then head to **Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel**, which is paradise on earth. Located bang next to the railway line and on the edge of Aguas Calientes, this eco-village is half tropical jungle and half five-star accommodation.

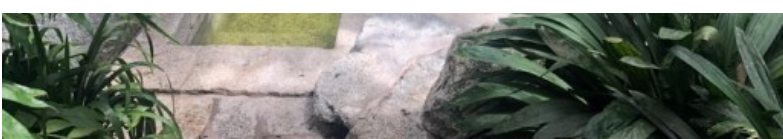
Our villa had private heated pools and rainforest showers, with outdoor canopy beds and huge bathtubs that looked onto the jungle. Bedroom slippers are made from recycled rubber and all the gorgeous bathroom products (included much-needed mozzie repellent) are made from natural, environmentally-friendly ingredients.

Again, there are endless eco excursions you can go on here – from early morning bird watching to midday orchid tours and twilight trips.

This branch is also more than fluent in cooking up amazing vegan options for dinner as well as breakfast (there's a brilliant buffet to pick at before you order your cooked option) – which is important for any hotel boasting eco-credentials.

You definitely don't have to climb Machu Picchu when you're out there; there are plenty of less popular mountain ranges in the Sacred Valley to explore and Aguas Calientes (and InkaTerra!) is worth visiting in and of itself.





(Picture: Miranda Larbi)



(Picture: Miranda Larbi)



(Picture: Miranda Larbi)

Back down to earth, the last week of the trip was spent working our way back from Machu Picchu to Lima, via Pisac, Cusco and Arequipa. Again, that was done via a series of buses and gave me the opportunity not only to explore new cities but to readjust to the idea of returning to a bustling city. Sometimes there's nothing more overwhelming than chilling out somewhere rural only to find yourself back in the middle of the capital for a flight; bus travel gives you a day to come back down to earth and start that reintegration process before you set foot in your location.

I returned to Lima calm, refreshed and ready to come back to London after a long old trip. And the best bit about it? Although I felt guilty about going out to Peru in the first place, at least we'd actively tried to minimise the environmental harm I'd generated whilst out there.



The practical stuff

The boat

We booked our boat tickets in person at Port Henry in Iquitos and that's really the only way to do it. Because they're dependent on the tides and various other out of control elements, there can be delays and hiccups so it's best to simply turn up the day before and see how on schedule things are running. It cost us around 350 soles (£81) for two, sharing a cabin with meals included.

The buses

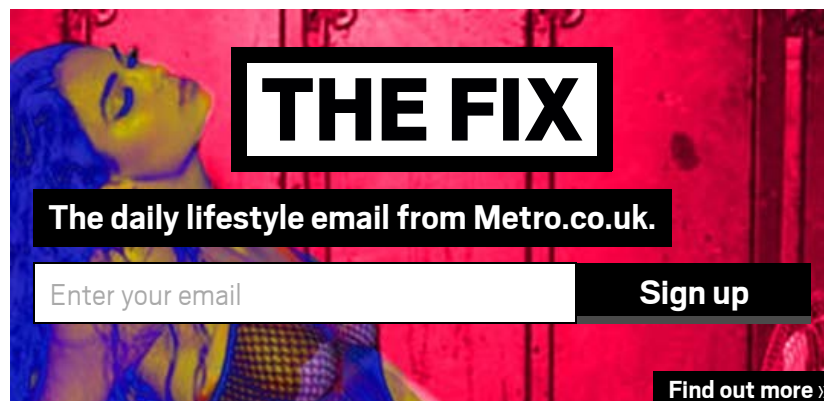
Buses are very easy to book ahead. We used **Busbud** and they run almost every day, and you can pay in GBP. Simply book and then turn up to the terminal on the day 20-30 minutes ahead to drop off your hold luggage. Prices vary but buses from Lima to Cusco start from about £24.

The eco-lodges

Inkaterra's hotels aren't given away but if like us you're planning a back-to-basics trip and fancy a night or two of total eco-luxury...or you're going on a honeymoon, then there's really nowhere else to go. Prices start at \$475.20 (£363.09) per room based on two adults sharing. Both hotels are accessible via public transport.

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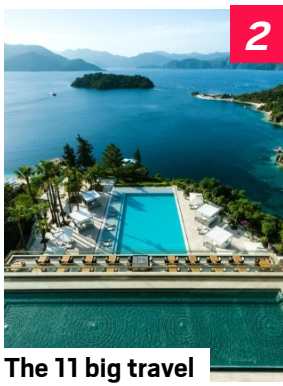


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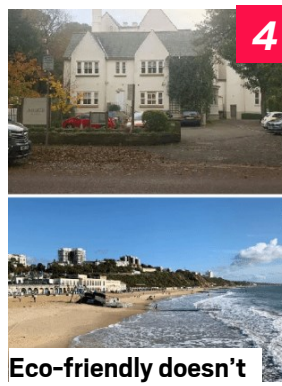
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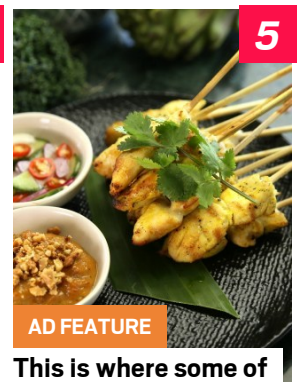
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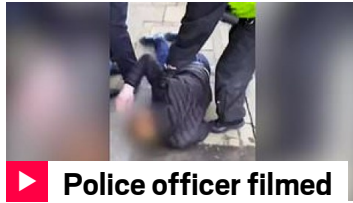
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