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BEYOND MACHU PICCHU

Mention Peru and the first thing that comes to mind is the lost city of the Incas, but this South American country has much more to offer.

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- 1 | The central wall of the Temple of Wiracocha located in Raqch'i is an Incan archeological site
- 2 | The incomparable Lake Titicaca
- 3 | Dawn breaks over the ancient citadel of the Incas – Machu Picchu
- 4 | At the lookout for a panoramic view of Misti volcano
- 5 | A flock of birds soar above a mountain pass on the high Andean plains

MACHU Picchu, one of the New Seven Wonders of the World, is on the bucket lists of most travellers. No surprise, for it is an astounding piece of architecture set on what must have been prime real estate in the times of the Incas. Abandoned in the 16th century, the city lay buried beneath the jungle until it was accidentally rediscovered by Hiram Bingham in July 1911. The Yale professor had been on the Inca Trail in search of another lost city when he stumbled on Machu Picchu.

Visitors today however needn't put themselves through the rigours of the Inca Trail to get to Machu Picchu, even if that is the best and most atmospheric approach. It is more accessible than you would imagine. Some even manage a day trip from Cusco, which in itself is a two-hour flight from Peru's capital, Lima. So it's quite conceivable to even plan a weekend to Machu Picchu if you're in that neck of the woods.

But Peru is much more than Machu Picchu – the country is geographically diverse, from lush Amazonian rainforests to arid deserts and snow-capped mountains, and its history and culture are layered and fascinating. What's more, Peru has some of the best eats in the world. Here are my picks of what Peru has to offer beyond Machu Picchu.

AREQUIPA

Guarded by three dramatic peaks – Misti volcano (5,822m), Mt Chachani (6,075m) and Mt Pichu Pichu (5,664m) – Arequipa, Peru's second largest city, is in a desert region in the south. At 2,380m Arequipa is the perfect place to acclimatise to the high altitude of the Andes. It is renowned for its architecture, history and culinary delights. The

historic centre of Arequipa, anchored by Plaza de Armas, should not be missed. Colonnaded balconies line three sides of the city square, with the other being taken up by the impressive cathedral.

Walking around the historic centre, you will see baroque-mestizo buildings crafted out of white volcanic rock – some have retained this original hue resulting in Arequipa being dubbed "The White City" while others have been given dramatic coats of paint from indigo to yellow.

One of the city's top attractions is the Museo Santuarios Andinos, which houses Juanita (or the Inca Ice Maiden), the Inca girl who was sacrificed when she was about 11-15 years old to the Inca gods in the 15th century. Her mummified remains discovered on Mount Ampato in 1995 had been well preserved as were her clothes, cap, and burial tapestry. Scientists were even able to tell what her last meal was and how she died.

Another attraction is the Monastery of Santa Catalina, founded in 1580 by the rich widow Maria de Guzman who chose her nuns from only the best Spanish families. Families had to pay a dowry when their daughters were admitted to the monastery. Encompassing 20,000 sq m, the monastery is a city within a city with vividly painted walls (best photographed in the late afternoon light), cloisters and what I found especially intriguing, a profundis room or mortuary where dead nuns were mourned and their portraits painted posthumously. The nuns living here were not subjected to a life of poverty – they had servants and slaves, and as seen at some of the living quarters, luxuries such as fine china and even a piano.



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COLCA VALLEY & COLCA CANYON

If you're spending some time in Arequipa, take an excursion to the Colca Canyon region, which includes the area around the Colca Valley. The drive from Arequipa is especially picturesque composed of undulating dunes, towering snow-capped peaks and a breathtaking vastness to the landscape.

Amidst the scrub and Andean grass, there are animals such as wild hare, and members of the camel family namely alpaca, guanaco and vicuna. The star attraction is the tan-coloured vicuna, which is left to roam freely across the plains unlike its cousins the alpaca and guanaco, which are domesticated. Once a year, the community in this region herd and fence the vicuna, as part of an ancient tradition to shear its fur. The soft fur of this protected animal is highly prized (a vicuna scarf can cost upwards of US\$400).

Arriving in the Colca valley from the desert region is a revelation of sorts – it is a lush valley of terraced farmland and small villages believed to have been first settled in the pre-Inca period. Vestiges of that time remain – in the form of the stepped terraces that continue to be cultivated with barley, potatoes and quinoa, and in the language and dress of the communities. There are several towns and communities in the valley such as Chivay, which has a rustic, frontier town feel to it and as in most towns in Peru, boasts a small square, with a church and market area.

Travelling along the Colca river, you will pass through colourful towns such as Maca, which boasts an impressive church that is a testament to the importance of the area's silver mines in the 17th and 18th centuries.

One of the highlights of the area is the Colca Canyon – with a depth of 3,270m it is the second deepest canyon in the world (twice that of the Grand Canyon in the US). In some parts, the canyon's sides are so steep you can't see the valley below. This is especially true at the condor lookout or Cruz del Condor. The rocky sides of the Colca Canyon are home to the Andean condor, the largest raptor in the world with wingspans of three metres.

The winter season from June to August is the best time to see the flight of the condor, as they glide above the canyon rim on warm thermal currents in search of food. It is a mesmerising sight – the magnificent birds soaring from the canyon's depths, gliding over the rugged terrain. That was one of the highlights of our trip.



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LAKE TITICACA

Every secondary school student would have learnt about Lake Titicaca – the highest navigable lake in the world on the border of Peru and Bolivia – and so it had to be on our must-visit list.

Most visitors go on day tours of the lake from Puno (on the shores of the great lake), visiting a few of the islands. There are homestays for the more adventurous. Most tours of Lake Titicaca will include a visit to Uros, a collection of reed islands about 30 minutes from Puno. Entire islands are made of reed or torturo – a testament to the imagination and brilliance of the lake's communities. To build an island, blocks of soil are tied together to form a floating base on which stacks of reed are piled and left to dry. Once the base is completed, houses (made of reed) are constructed – usually about two or three dwellings per island.

Although there are several islands on Lake Titicaca, only a few welcome visitors. Uros, for instance depends solely on tourist dollars for income – tour companies pay the islanders for groups they bring. Islanders also sell handicraft.

Another island worth visiting is Taquile – some 2½-hours away from Uros. The journey to Taquile offers breathtaking views of Lake Titicaca. You get an appreciation of the magnitude and sheer beauty of the lake – impossibly azure waters and in the distance the snow-capped peaks of the Bolivian Andean range.

Taquile was a prison during the colonial era but was bought by the local community and today depends on tourism. There are no roads or vehicles here so to get around, it's all leg-power, which can be a challenge given the altitude (Puno and the Lake Titicaca region are at about 3,800m). But up on the hills the views are stunning, and the visit was one of the highlights of the trip.



- 6 | Reed boats on lake Titicaca
- 7 | Santa Catalina
- 8 | Cheeky children at Lake Titicaca
- 9 | On one of the many floating islands of Uros on Lake Titicaca
- 10 | The azure waters of Lake Titicaca seen from Taquile island
- 11 | Ceviche
- 12 | Chupe de camarones
- 13 | Fried rice and fish in bean paste
- 14 | Tiradito
- 15 | Causa or potato stack
- 16 | Tacu tacu
- 17 | Creole-style lamb stew
- 18 | Sushi rolls in leche in tigre sauce
- 19 | Quinoa soup
- 20 | Passionfruit sour
- 21 | Ancient Inca terraces at Moray



FOOD

Ranking very high on the list of Peru's highlights must be its food. Although the most famous of its gifts to world cuisine must be ceviche, Peruvian food is varied thanks to its geography, history and different cultures.

For an idea of the diversity of Peruvian ingredients, visit a market – Surquillo Market in Lima and San Camillo Market in Arequipa for example. Here, you'll see a variety of corn and potato (potato was incidentally first cultivated in Peru some 10,000 years ago and there are more than 3,000 varieties of potato in Peru) as well as chilli, fruit and vegetables. Fish is popular in Peru, and although ceviche is served at almost every restaurant, there are a number of fried, grilled and baked fish dishes worth trying.

If you're in Arequipa, don't miss regional specialties such as chupe de camarones (shrimp chowder) and rocoto relleno (stuffed rocoto peppers), alpaca and cuy (roasted guinea pig). In the Titicaca area, trout from the lake is fresh and tasty. Then there are the drinks, and there is none more deserving of praise than the pisco sour, a cocktail made from pisco (like grappa) and citrus juice (our favourite being maracuya sours made with passionfruit).

Though it is possible to eat cheaply (and well!) in Peru, it's well worth spending a little more to sample some of the country's best restaurants and eats, from modern Peruvian (by the likes of Gaston Acurio, who is said to have been the one responsible for introducing Peruvian food to the world), Japanese-Peruvian (sushi rolls in leche de tigre sauce or Asian inspired ceviche), Peruvian criollo (comfort food or everyday food such as causa, potato stack, aji de gallina, chicken in yellow pepper sauce; and tacu tacu, rice and refried beans), and Peruvian Chinese (chifa).

Peru's gastronomy is said to be a bigger draw for visitors than the Incas – no surprise given the quantity and quality of restaurants in the country with Lima being home to restaurants that rank highly in the world's top restaurant lists. You could spend a month in Lima and never finish sampling some of the city's best eats, I reckon.



INCAN RELICS

Although Machu Picchu is the star of Peru's archaeological sites, the country is also home to sites that pre-date this Inca citadel. Visiting these sites give one an appreciation of the ingenuity, strength and wealth of the Inca and the cultures that predate it. Some of these Inca and pre-Inca relics can be found along the Andean high plains such as the Temple of Wiracocha in Raqch'i.

When heading to Machu Picchu, it's worth spending a few days in Cusco (Temple of Qorikancha and Saqsaywaman are must-visits) and the Sacred Valley to visit Inca sites such as Moray, Pisac and Ollataytambo.

Although we spent two weeks in Peru, and saw and experienced more than we initially bargained for, there is much more to discover. As for Machu Picchu – which we saved for the last leg of the trip – well, it was indeed a spectacular sight. ■

