



This lady, dressed in traditional garb, mans her stall at the Colca Valley, which must be one of the highest shopping spots on earth. — SREEREMA BANOO

Land of the Incas

There's far more to Peru than Machu Picchu, such as its culture, history, architecture, and culinary delights. >2



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A view of Misti volcano from Arequipa.



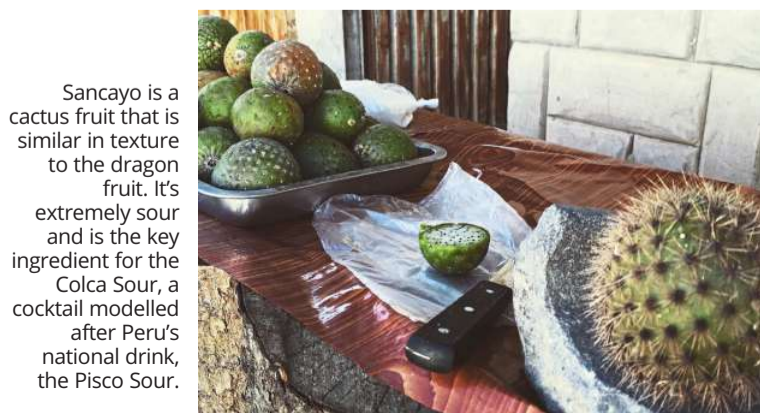
Arequipa's Plaza de Armas, or main square, is one of the prettiest in Peru. — Photos: SREEREMA BANOO



Calera Hot Springs in Chivay.



The warm smiles of the locals help you forget about the thin air at the Paso de Patopampa.



Sancayo is a cactus fruit that is similar in texture to the dragon fruit. It's extremely sour and is the key ingredient for the Colca Sour, a cocktail modelled after Peru's national drink, the Pisco Sour.

Breathless in Peru

On a road trip around the southern part of this South American country, the writer discovers a rugged landscape that contrasts with the warm reception of the local folks.

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"HOW is everyone feeling? All OK? Any headaches? Feeling dizzy? Breathing all OK?" asks our guide, Lus, over the din of Arequipa's traffic. For the next few days, as we travelled across the high plains of southern Peru, Lus, and the guides that followed, would continue to ask us these questions – not surprising, as we were travelling across altitudes exceeding 3,000m.

When I planned this trip – a father-daughter trip one year in the making – my primary concern was the altitude and the potential dangers of altitude sickness. I read and researched it assiduously. But my concerns were not without merit for not only would I be travelling with my father (physically fit though he is), but I am also an asthmatic. The stories I read online or heard from those who have travelled in places with thin air – of the nausea, headaches, breathlessness, loss of appetite, and other effects of altitude – did not help.

One of the top tips I gleaned from all my reading was the importance of acclimatisation and travelling gradually from a lower to higher elevation. So this meant that although the main aim of the trip to Peru was Machu Picchu, I decided to save that for last.

Instead of heading directly from Lima to Cusco (at an elevation of 3,400m, the ancient capital of the Incas is the gateway to Machu Picchu), we would instead fly south to Arequipa (elevation 2,380m),

spend a few days acclimatising to the altitude and at the same time explore the architectural, historical and culinary delights of Peru's second largest city. From here, we would travel overland across the high plains of southern Peru, breaking journey in the Colca valley and Puno, on the shores of Lake Titicaca, before crossing another stretch of high plains to Cusco.

It was, you could say, a little detour; as it turned out, it yielded some of the best sights and experiences of our two-week trip.

Majestic mountains

We leave Arequipa about eight in the morning and, as the traffic thins on the outskirts, we see the snow-capped Misti volcano, one of three peaks surrounding Arequipa (the other two being Mt Chachani and Mt Pichu Pichu). This is a desert region, a fact that's apparent as we leave the city behind. Arid though the landscape may be, there is vegetation – scrub, patches of Andean grass and cacti.

Animals such as wild hare and members of the camel family – namely alpaca, guanaco and vicuna – roam the land. The star attraction is the tan-coloured vicuna, smallest of the three camels and more skittish. Unlike the alpaca and guanaco, which are domesticated, the vicuna is wild and left to roam freely across the plains. Once a year, the community in this region participate in an ancient tradition of herding and fencing the vicuna to shear its fur. The soft

fur of this protected animal is highly prized; a vicuna scarf can cost upwards of US\$400 (RM1,790).

We stop a few times to take photos of the vicuna before pushing on, the road taking us higher into the Andean plains. The scenery is simply breath-taking – undulating terrain, dunes and plateaus, towering snow-capped mountains in the distance, a volcano with a plume of smoke that seems like an extension of the clouds, and a vastness to the landscape that is indescribable. That all of this stark beauty sits below a cloudless blue sky just makes this land heartbreakingly beautiful.

Two hours later we pull into our first pit stop – Patawasi. We are now at an elevation of almost 4,000m and some of the other members of my travelling party are already feeling the effects – mild dizziness and shortness of breath. To alleviate these symptoms, Lus suggests a coca tea infusion made of dried coca leaves (from the plant that produces cocaine) as well as several other herbs. We also buy a bag of coca leaves to chew and stave off the effects of altitude.

Once we are on the road, Lus takes a few coca leaves and says a small prayer to Pachamama (Quechua for Mother Earth) for a safe and uneventful journey, scattering the leaves to the wind. A predominantly Catholic country, Peruvians, especially those living in the Andes region, still hold on to traditional beliefs and tend to blend these beliefs with Catholicism.



The picturesque landscape of the Colca Valley.



The writer and her father on a trip of a lifetime.



Arriving in Puno, our first glimpse of Lake Titicaca.

Prayer completed, Lus takes about eight to 10 coca leaves, breaks a small piece of chalk (which is included in the bag of coca leaves) and rolls the combo into a small cigar. This she tucks into one corner of her mouth and chews. We follow suit. The taste is not unpleasant but leaves the side of your mouth you've masticated somewhat numb.

My father and I find chewing the coca leaves and drinking copious amounts of water helpful in coping with the altitude. So far neither of us has headaches but our biggest test is just around the corner – Paso de Patopampa. At 4,910m above sea level, this pit stop is a lifeless mountain pass boasting a panoramic view of eight snow-capped volcanoes: Ubinas (5,675m), Misti (5,822m), Chachani (6,075m), Ampato (6,310m), Sabancayo (5,976m), Huacca Huacca (6,025m), Mismi (5,597m) and Chucura (5,360m).

The altitude hits us as soon as we step out of the van and take a few steps – the air is thin and it is bitterly cold. Although you may not be able to breathe deeply, taking things easy, walking slowly and just staying calm helps heaps. We don't stay here very long and are soon on our way to our destination for the night, the Colca Valley.

Arriving in the Colca Valley is a revelation of sorts – from the desert, we enter a lush valley of terraced farmland and small villages. The valley is believed to have been first settled in the pre-Inca period by the Quechua-speaking Cabanas from the Wari culture and Aymara-speaking Collaguas who moved here from the Lake Titicaca area. The Incas arrived in the 14th century, establishing their power through marriage. The stepped terraces here dating back to the pre-Inca times continue to be cultivated with bar-

ley, potatoes and quinoa, and many of the people maintain their ancestral traditions as seen in their language and dress.

We break journey in Chivay, the largest town in the valley, which has a rustic, frontier town feel to it. After a lunch of delicious Peruvian dishes that include quinoa soup, braised alpaca (so yummy, I went back for seconds) and fried trout, we check into our digs for a short rest. Later in the afternoon, we head to the Calera Hot Springs. The water is a lovely 39°C and there is none of that sulphur odour that's usually present at hot springs. It is a stunning location – craggy mountains on one side, a river bordered by wildflowers on the other, and the setting is especially picturesque in the setting sun.

The next morning, we hit the road at six, driving along the Colca river to the Colca Canyon and passing colourful towns such as

Maca that were once rich silver mining communities.

Flight of the condor

The second deepest canyon in the world – at 3,270m the Colca Canyon is twice as deep as the Grand Canyon in the United States – its sides are so steep you can't see the valley below. This is especially true at the condor lookout or Cruz del Condor.

Travellers make their way to this lookout for a chance to see these majestic birds as they glide above the canyon rim on warm thermal currents in search for food. The rocky sides of the Colca Canyon are home to the Andean condor, the largest raptor in the world boasting a wingspan of 3m.

The winter season from June to August is the best time to see these birds but it is a waiting game. After almost an hour, just as we are about to leave, a condor soars

from the canyon's depths, gliding over the rugged terrain. Soon, another one emerges, and soars above us before gliding and dipping back into its nest. It's a magical and mesmerising moment, and is definitely worth the wait.

Happy with that once-in-a-lifetime experience, we make our way back to our van and hit the road again. Over the next few days, we would travel some 800km. We traversed across diverse landscapes, and along the way sampled some delicious food and fruit, learnt about the rich, textured history and culture of the Andean people, and found that Peru has so much more to offer than just Machu Picchu. And save for a brief headache in Puno, I came away largely unscathed by the altitude. In fact, I have never breathed better than during those four days on the high plains of Peru. Oh, and my father had a pretty awesome time too.

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