

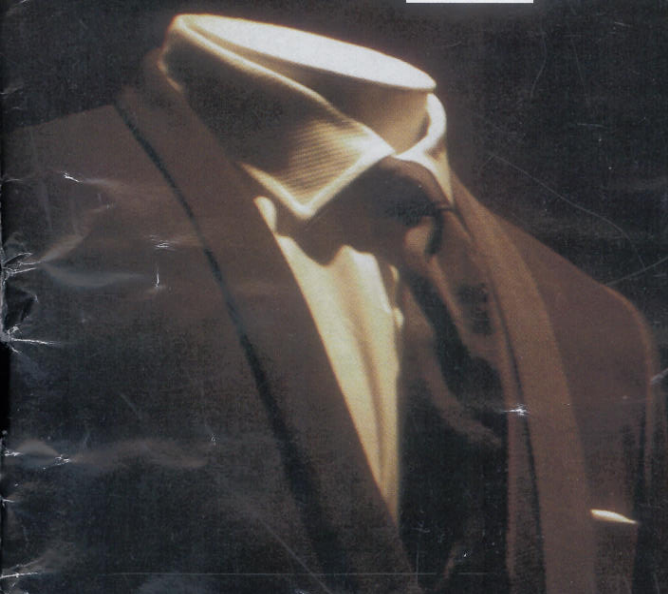
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how to spend it

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THE LONDON UNDERGROUND
UBER-COOL MENSWEAR IN A MAYFAIR BANK VAULT



MANY SHADES OF PERU

As Lima vies for pole position as the culinary capital of South America, the country's interior is serving up smart new hotels alongside off-the-beaten-track adventure. Melinda Stevens gets a taste.



Like lots of great adventures, this story ends with a party. A wild three-day street bonanza: drinking, feasting and dancing so hard that feet bleed and plaits whip through the air like lassos of fire.

But it starts differently. It starts with a storm. A great rolling cotton-wool ball of a storm that sits on the city to maximum effect. It catches everyone by surprise and you can see why; flying over the Peruvian capital of Lima is like landing in the shoe of a golfer who has spent the morning stuck in a bunker. Forget the cobbled colourfulness of lots of South American capitals; this is a desert dust bowl. "Does it ever rain in Lima?" I ask the taxi driver. "No way," he says aghast. "No way. This ain't London, lady." And he harrumphs, like I'm an idiot.

And then, right at that moment, a dollop of water splashes on to the windscreen. There's a pause. One moment more and the our entire view is obliterated

by rain. The driver starts to laugh. He laughs without stopping for breath. "Whooh," he roars. "Whooh, whooh. This is crazy, man."

But forget the weather. Peru is having a moment. As Lima's reputation as a culinary capital grows, and both established and boutique hotel companies debut new smart properties and recce untapped locations, all eyes seem to be on this country's potential to dominate the South American market.

Big hotel groups with an established presence in the country, such as Orient-Express and Libertador, have fresh beauties to parade. In the colonial town of Cuzco, Palacio Nazarenas (pictured overleaf), which opens fully in June, will be Orient-Express's sixth property in the country (although, at the time of writing, it had just sold one of these, Las Casitas del Colca). It has Cuzco's first outside pool but also – rather brilliantly – oxygenated air, scented with the smell of Andean flowers, which will be pumped through the ventilators into the bedrooms. And for those keen to explore the Nazca Desert in the south, Libertador's



Las Casitas del Colca, in the Colca Canyon, has cottages scattered about the valley.



“No other country in South America has such an incredible history and culture that can be tapped so easily.”

contemporary jungle; you'll find it all here – just about everyone you meet in Peru will give you a list of their favourite restaurants in Lima.

To eat at Chez Wong, where there is no menu, you must book; at Malabar, the Amazonian pork is delicious; La Rosa Náutica is right on the seafront; Bravo Restobar has a certain pisco mixed with ginger ale that is particularly frisky; and under sailcloth canopies at Mesa 18 the squid comes bubbling in hot butter. But nowhere can beat La Mar for ceviche – except maybe El Mercado. Or, indeed, Central.

The young chef behind Central, Virgilio Martinez, is bone-thin, lightly freckled and on a roll. Orient-Express has just put him in charge of its kitchens at Palacio Nazarenas and at the end of May, following in the footprints of new Peruvian restaurants such as Ceviche in Soho, he'll be opening his own restaurant – called Lima – in Shoreditch. “Every day,” says Martinez, “I'll find at least five people waiting outside Central wanting to work in my kitchens. Being a chef in Lima right now is like being a rock star – you get groupies.”

In the early morning mist, while a knot of surfers bob on distant breaks, Martinez and I make our way through the honking traffic to shop at the local market. There are cinnamon sticks as long as pole vaults, artichokes so spiky they look like tigers' paws and an absurd number of potatoes the colour of pink highlighter pen.

From behind the piles of pig brains, a muffled voice offers up those other Peruvian specialities – guinea pig to eat, cocoa leaves to chew and the hallucinogenic infusion ayahuasca. “Here,” says an old woman, widening her eyes just enough to reveal the treacle pooling round her irises, “take this and I promise you eight hours of light.”

The next day we are en route to the Colca Canyon, and the weather is in a fury. A great, treeless, birdless landscape of misty bleak scrub stretches on and on. It feels like half a thought, an unfinished place. At

one point, we pass a sign for a llama crossing. Then a lake the colour of a shiny copper penny. Further and further we climb up into the snow, through the wet haze, past a landslide and then another. We reach Las Casitas del Colca (pictured on previous pages), a property Orient-Express acquired and renovated in 2008, and has just sold. It's impossible to see out of the window. I go to sleep, my toes clinging like chinchillas to the hot-water bottle.

The next morning there is a different scene entirely. Glorious sunshine is spilling on to meticulously terraced fields and hummingbirds are drinking from red-hot-poker flowers. There are snow-capped mountains and a river rushing through a plunging gorge. Condors flick across the Andes, and on my terrace a cat purrs at my feet. The air smells of eucalyptus.

The Colca Canyon is a revelation – a 100km-long geographical masterpiece. Verdant at this time of year, it is as dramatic and pastoral as

a kingdom drawn by a child. Las Casitas turns out to be a hotel of Zorro-like pleasures, with under-floor heating and fresh trout for supper. Scattered about the valley are cottages with steaming outdoor bathtubs, grand four-poster beds and crackling fires. We drink Malbec, ride horses whose saddles have wooden stirrups shaped like Toblerones, and feed llamas with baby bottles.

But if the Colca Canyon is a sort of Hobbits' Shire, Lake Titicaca – its very name an incantation – is a

Left: the terrace of the Titilaka Lodge.
Below: a bedroom at the Orient-Express's Palacio Nazarenas.



Hotel Paracas offers a low-slung, bright-white permutation of contemporary cool at the edge of the sea in front of the Paracas Nature Reserve, with private chartered flights over Nazca's high-desert plains.

But, arguably, more excitingly, the independent-hotel profile here – having rather dragged its feet compared to its counterparts in the wildernesses of Argentina and Chile – is finally ready to reveal its full plumage. There are new offerings on the way from the low-key local Casa Andina collection and the environmentally savvy ByInkaterra outfitters. Explora, the deeply sophisticated adventure company that kicked off the whole fresh-faced hotel scene on this continent about 20 years ago, is said to be looking for new opportunities. And, as of late last year, the smartest Amazon boat adventures available are not in Brazil, but here. There is the refurbished *Delfin*, which pioneered the trend, while in April 2011, Aqua Expeditions launched its second cruiser, the Jordi Puig-designed *M/V Aria* (pictured overleaf), with elegant bedrooms and wide, pane-glass views to soak up the great river.

“Peru is definitely the South American story for this year and, I would think, several to come,” says Paul Irvine, co-founder of bespoke local tour operators Dehouche. “No other country [on the continent] has such an incredible history and culture, that can, from a practical standpoint, be tapped quite so quickly, quite so easily. And now, in terms of art, of restaurants, of off-the-beaten-track adventures and new hotels, Peru is

becoming more cutting edge than Brazil and Argentina. We're finding our most savvy clients are requesting Peru above the other countries.”

And what do they do when they get there? Feast in Lima. The city may not be as photogenic as its Latin sisters – patrician Buenos Aires, ravishing Cartagena – but it has an international name as the emerging gastro capital of South America. Chinese, Japanese, Mediterranean, Andean, classic Peruvian, avant-garde



Right: one of the Uros floating islands made of reeds on Lake Titicaca. Below: Aqua Expeditions' Jordi Puig-designed M/V *Aria* takes visitors up the Peruvian Amazon.



witches' board game of brilliance. Here, at an altitude of nearly 4,000m, people do things differently. In the town of Juliaca, near the Bolivian border, everyone is as busy as a swarm of bees, trundling around on bicycles and wearing bowler hats. On the nearby Uros Islands, girls full of giggles have long pigtailed tied together in the middle of their backs. We are rowed across the water in a great reed boat, part *Kon-Tiki*, part Viking cruiser. Here, in their mad floating kingdom, everything is made of reeds: houses, beds, the very islands themselves.

The loveliest of the Casa Andina properties is also here, on the Isla Suasi, an absurdly quiet spot with wandering llamas and home-cooked food. But however sweet its charms, on another part of the lake is one of the most sophisticated, and fun, places to stay in all South America. Titilaka Lodge (pictured on previous page), which opened in 2007, may not look like much on the outside – an unassuming white cube – but inside it is all contemporary cleverness. At the heart of its appeal are the windows, which are everywhere; there's a huge square one at the end of a corridor, and a horizontal slice of one spills bright light on to a long line of day beds. The full blast of lake life hits you from every angle: fields of golden corn in a gossipy fluster, the lake bobbing and brilliant, and villagers on a bright-red beach playing

football. But however grown-up and architecturally astute this place may be, it is also wonderfully cheeky – the bar is furnished with a pink padded wall and curious painted-metal sheep that hide in corners. At night, while lightening cracks on the horizon, I drink champagne, eat smoked trout and avocado, and muse that I am on top of the world in the middle of nowhere. Happily, the team behind it are opening up a new hotel in Lima by the end of this year, in an old *belle époque* mansion in the up-and-coming bohemian district of Barranco.

And then the festival of La Virgen de la Candelaria is upon us. In Puno, the folklore capital of Peru, the beer drinking has started early, and will go on for the next three days, at least. Drums are drumming, horns are tooting, the parade is in full swing. Golden ladies twist and turn their tassled shawls like the rays of the sun; young boys in pinstriped suits blast their tubas and wink at the cheering crowd. There are peacock feathers pluming out of dragons' mouths, pink sequin boots up to the thigh, a group of Gruffaloes, head to toe in thick fur. The drums, the cymbals, the clacking of heels combine, like kirtan, to set your heart at a different pulse.

The day parties on. The music gets louder, the crowd rowdier and the dancing wilder. We make a bid for freedom and break off the main drag, running for the

At an altitude of nearly 4,000m, Lake Titicaca is a witches' board game of brilliance.

cover of the backstreets. Pouring in the opposite direction are ladies carrying towers of blue candyfloss and jewel-coloured jellies. There are children making last-minute adjustments to their sequined ponchos – a serpent, a moonbeam.

And as we scramble round a final corner, there is the last sight of a girl dancing in a twirl, her skirts rising up to reveal her mass of thick petticoats, layer upon layer of gold, indigo, celadon, violet and a flash of neon rose. It may sometimes be so misty here you can barely see your hand in front of your face; but, it turns out, you are never very far from a vital shot of Peruvian colour. ♦

PERU'S THE OPTIONS

Melinda Stevens travelled as a guest of **Dehouche** (0871-284 7770; www.dehouche.com), which offers seven-night custom itineraries to Peru from £5,500 per person, including accommodation, internal flights, transfers, 24-hour concierge service and all activities; and of **Iberia Airlines** (0870-609 0500; www.iberia.com), which flies daily to Lima from Heathrow via Madrid, from £576.

Aqua Expeditions, +516-560 1053; www.aquaexpeditions.com, from \$2,500 per person for three nights. **ByInkaterra**, www.byinkaterra.com. **Casa Andina Isla Suasi**, +511-213 9739; www.casa-andina.com, from \$232. **Delfin**, +511-719 0998; www.delfinamazoncruises.com, from \$3,200 per person for three nights. **Las Casitas del Colca**, colca@ghlhoteles.com, from \$595. **Palacio Nazarenas**, 0845-077 2222; www.orient-express.com, from £605. **Paracas Hotel**, +515-658 1333; www.libertador.com.pe, from £279. **Titilaka Lodge**, +511-700 5100; www.titilaka.com, from \$530.

RESTAURANTS: Bravo Restobar, Av Conquistadores 1005, San Isidro, Lima (+511-221 5700; www.bravorestobar.com). **Central**, Calle Santa Isabel 376, Miraflores, Lima (+511-242 8515; www.centralrestaurante.com.pe). **Chez Wong**, Enrique León García 114, La Victoria, Lima (+511-470 6217). **El Mercado**, Hipolito Unanue 203, Miraflores, Lima (+511-221 1322, www.rafaelosterling.com). **La Mar**, Av La Mar 770, Miraflores, Lima (+511-421 3365; www.lamarcebicheria.com). **Malabar**, Av Camino Real 101, San Isidro, Lima (+511-440-5200; www.malabar.com.pe). **Mesa 18**, Av Malecón de la Reserva 1035, Miraflores, Lima (+511-610 4000; www.mesa18restaurant.com). **Le Rosa Náutica**, Espigón 4 Circuito de Playas, Miraflores, Lima (+511-445 0149; www.larosanautica.com).