

CALIFORNIA & THE GOLDEN WEST



15 DAYS FROM £1659PP Departures up to November 2014

An outstanding tour exploring Western USA's world-famous National Parks, intriguing native Indian history, amazing desert landscapes, lush forests, the lofty peaks of the Sierra Nevada and including its pulsating and unique cities.

INCLUDES

- Return flights from London Heathrow
- Stay in hand-picked three and four-star hotels
- Stay three nights in cosmopolitan San Francisco, America's favourite city, dominated by the instantly recognisable Golden Gate Bridge
- Guided tours of Los Angeles, San Diego and San Francisco

- Visit and stay in glitzy Las Vegas – the 'Entertainment Capital of the World'
- Visit timeless Monument Valley, immortalised in so many classic 'westerns'
- Experience the stunning beauty of the Grand Canyon, Bryce Canyon, Zion National Park and Yosemite National Park. Our overnight stays and visits are carefully timed to see these awe-inspiring sights when the light displays them at their most beautiful
- Enjoy a superb optional helicopter flight over the Grand Canyon
- Escorted by an experienced tour manager



SOUTH AFRICA

16 DAYS FROM £2299PP Departures up to November 2014 & January to April 2015

A tour taking you into the very heart of South Africa, exploring its unique history, amazing wildlife, truly breath-taking scenery and vibrant cities, all complemented by its excellent cuisine and wines

INCLUDES

- Return scheduled flights from London Heathrow
- Staying in excellent quality three and four-star hotels on a bed and breakfast basis, including two lunches and three dinners
- Full day guided safari in the Kruger National Park, one of the world's premier game reserves
- Tour of the legendary Zulu War battlefields of Isandlwana and Rorke's Drift
- Internal flight to the stunning 'Garden Route'

- Go whale watching in Hermanus (depending on season)
- Enjoy a scenic drive through the beautiful small country of Swaziland
- Stay in the heart of the fabulously beautiful Western Cape's Winelands, experiencing a cellar tour and tasting at a 300-year old wine estate
- Visits to the legendary Cape of Good Hope and the Kirstenbosch Botanical Gardens in Cape Town
- Visit to Johannesburg's Apartheid Museum
- Stay three nights in cosmopolitan Cape Town
- Visit the awe-inspiring Blyde River Canyon
- Option to stay a night in a tented safari camp and experience a sunrise bushwalk
- Escorted by an experienced tour manager

Holidays organised by and are subject to the booking conditions of Riviera Travel, New Manor, 328 Wetmore Road, Burton upon Trent, Staffs DE14 3SP and is offered subject to availability. ABTA V4744 ATOL 3430 protected. Per person prices based on two sharing a twin room. Single rooms and optional insurance available at a supplement. Images used in conjunction with Riviera Travel.

CALL 01283 742346 OR VISIT mirrortriviera.co.uk

You don't need to rough it on a backpacking tour to see the real Peru... sit back and grab a cocktail as you explore the South American gem by train

By **FRANCESCA COOKNEY**

As the train winds along the mountain pass, I look out at the eucalyptus trees that line the tracks and breathe deeply. The sun is warm against my face and I'm leaning on the brass railings of the open carriage sipping my cool, fresh pisco sour.

"This is more like it," I think.

Don't get me wrong, I've done the adventure travel thing – sweating on crowded buses, my backpack between my knees and second-hand cigarette smoke in my nostrils. But this time I decided to do it in style.

So, with my backpack safely stowed in the train's luggage compartment, I'm enjoying the fresh air and a beaker of the local tippie – made from grape brandy, lime juice and egg white – on the Andean Explorer, an elegant Pullman-style locomotive that is Peru's answer to the Orient Express.

My journey began at 8am in Cusco, south-west Peru. It is the region's main city and the ancient capital of the Sacred Valley of the Incas. Over the next 10 hours the train rolls over highland plains and through mountains, reaching 14,176 feet, before arriving in the city of Puno, on the shores of Lake Titicaca.

JAW-DROPPING

At 12,507 feet, it is the highest navigable lake in the world and is one of many jaw-dropping sights in this beautiful and diverse country.

With its Inca temples, mountains, jungles and rich cultural and spiritual heritage, Peru is a Mecca for grungy gap-year students and ageing hippies seeking self-affirmation through punishing treks and cups of coca leaf tea.

There's certainly no shortage of coca leaf tea, which is brewed from leaves of the plant used to produce cocaine but is legal and causes effects no stronger than caffeine. But you don't have to rough it to get the most out of this South American country.

From Cusco you can visit all the Inca sites in the area. Tours are cheap and easy to book at hotels or the many tourist offices around the central Plaza de Armas.

The Inca tribes occupied Peru from the early 13th century until the late 1500s, when they were defeated and driven out by the Spanish. But much of their incredible architecture remains.

You can climb the Inca ruins in Ollantaytambo, wind your way down the mysterious circular terraces at Moray and marvel at the jagged dry stone walls of the hilltop Sacsayhuaman fortress.

But the region's major pull is Machu Picchu, the 15th century sacred Inca site perched high on a remote mountain plateau. Untouched for centuries, it was uncovered in 1911 by the American explorer Hiram Bingham III. The Incas believed that the spot had

INCA REDIBLE JOURNEY

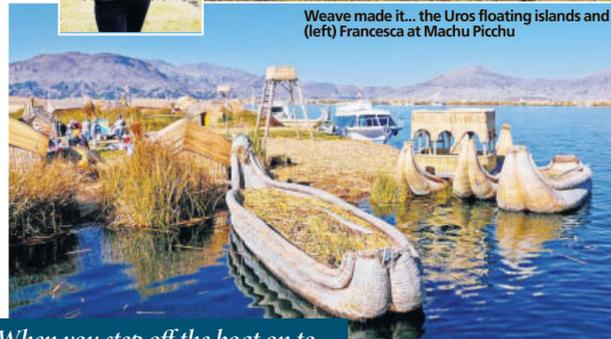


High culture... Inca ruins at Machu Picchu

Picture: GETTY



Weave made it... the Uros floating islands and (left) Francesca at Machu Picchu



'When you step off the boat on to one of the islands, the reeds move unneringly beneath your feet'

cosmic powers and visitors flock to it hoping for a spiritual experience.

At one time the only way to get there was a gruelling four-day hike along precarious mountain paths

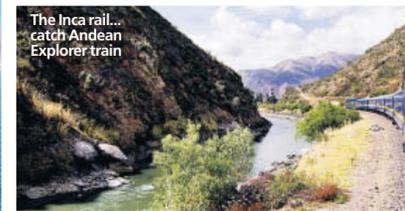
through the surrounding cloud forests.

Thankfully there is a more leisurely option. The glass-roofed Vistadome train takes you from Cusco up to the tiny town of Aguas Calientes (£51 return, perurail.com). From there a bus will take you up the winding mountain roads to the entrance of the city for about £12 return. An entry ticket to Machu Picchu costs about £26 (www.machupicchu.gov.pe). You must show a form of photo ID to get in so take your passport.

When you tire of Incas, visit the market at Pisac to stock up on brightly-coloured woven knitwear or silky soft alpaca fleece products and go to town on Peruvian cuisine at one of Cusco's many fabulous restaurants.

The local nosh is largely based around the staples of corn and potatoes (Peru has more than 3,000 different types) combined with chilli peppers alongside fish and meats such as beef and chicken.

Traditional grains such as the protein-rich quinoa are also popular for bulking out soups and in place of rice in risotto and stir-fries. There is a strong Spanish influence as well as Italian (you won't go



The Inca rail... catch Andean Explorer train

short of pizza in Cusco) and the country's location on the Pacific coast means traditional dishes are infused with Chinese and Japanese elements. For example there's lomo saltado, a beef stir-fry made with soy sauce and chilli peppers served with chips.

For the more adventurous I highly recommend trying an alpaca steak. The llama-like animals not only produce some of the world's softest wool, they are also bred for their incredibly flavourful meat.

Alpaca meat is low in fat and cholesterol and, frankly, delicious. Also check out ceviche, a seafood dish reminiscent of sushi – the fish is cured in citrus juices – served with sweet potato and crispy corn.

And, yes, I'm afraid it's true, guinea pig – cuy – is on the menu. At a top restaurant you might find it shredded and marinated on a terrine of mashed potato but at any averagely-priced place you could be in for a shock. It usually arrives

Ollantaytambo... locals and (right) fruit stalls



with head and limbs still attached after being fried or roasted. In Cusco city I liked Greens on Santa Catalina Angosta, which serves great alpaca steak salad and local craft beers (mains from £5), and the brightly-decorated Macondo on Cuesta San Blas (mains from £5.50).

Lunch on the Andean Explorer is a three-course gourmet affair served at around 13,123ft. Then it's another glass of pisco and back to the viewing carriage, watching the tracks uncurl behind us as we make our way across deserted grassy plains towards Lake Titicaca.

The lake – with shores in Peru and Bolivia – is home to several indigenous communities who live on its islands with no electricity or cars. On the Peru side are Taquile and Amantani, which you can visit on a boat trip (from £30 for a day including lunch).

But the main attraction is the 44 Uros artificial floating islands, which are made entirely of dried reeds. Anchored with ropes staked into the lake bed, they are home to 200 to 300 permanent residents whose boats, houses and furniture are all made of reeds too.

ADVENTUROUS

When you step off the boat on to one of the islands, the reeds squish and move unneringly beneath you. Adventurous travellers can spend a night on one of the islands, bunking down on a bed of reeds under layers of colourful woven blankets.

It's late afternoon when we chug slowly into Juliaca, the trade centre for the region. Children run alongside the train laughing and waving. In the heart of the town, a market is in full swing beside – and on – the railway line. Plastic chairs and rugs spread with fruit, vegetables and bric-a-brac are calmly whipped out of the way as we come through, the sellers barely looking up.

The clear blue sky above the lake fades into dusky mauve, orange then indigo and the guard announces we're at our final stop.

And we've certainly got there in style.

TRAVEL FILE

GOOD TO KNOW
Peru is a high-altitude destination and most people suffer some form of altitude sickness at first. It's best to give yourself two or three days to acclimatise before attempting strenuous.

WHERE TO STAY
In Cusco, a double at the Tierra Viva hotel costs from £55 a night B&B. tierravivahoteles.com
Puno's Intiqua Hotel is a comfy base for exploring the lake. A double room with breakfast costs from £45 a night. intiquahotel.com

BOOK IT
A one-way journey from Cusco to Puno on the Andean Explorer train departing at 8am and arriving at 6pm, including lunch and afternoon tea on board, costs £160pp.

GETTING THERE
American Airlines fly to Cusco from Heathrow with return flights departing from Arequipa from £606. americanairlines.co.uk, 0844 499 7300

DO YOUR RESEARCH
peru.travel/en
Get inspired at mirror.co.uk/travel

'Visit the market to stock up on bright knitwear or silky soft alpaca products'