

South American Adventures: Peru and Bolivia. Olivia Dawson

This summer I spent a month travelling around Peru and Bolivia with a fellow Girtonian, Charlie Mabbutt. The aim of our trip was simply to explore, hike and meet as many new people as possible. I'm pleased to say that this was a success and we achieved exactly what we had hoped to! This short report will take you through our trip, stop by stop, to give a little bit of an insight into what we got up to.

After the 12-hour flight from London to Lima, exhausted, we set out to find our first hostel where we had exactly seven hours to sleep before our first bus journey of the trip. We travelled through Peru using the bus company 'Peru Hop' which, as the name suggests, is a hop-on/hop-off bus that allows you the flexibility to travel where and when you want! It is a fantastic idea and made travelling seamless. Our first bus involved a nine-hour journey to the coastal town of Paracas where we spent a night. After settling into our hostel, we ventured out into this quiet, fishing town – perfect for two sleepy, jet-lagged travellers! After a bit of exploring, we stumbled upon a restaurant with a panoramic view of the coastline, where we dined on tenderloin steak accompanied with fried bananas and the infamous Pisco Sour, the local cocktail, all for a mere £10! Afterwards, we headed back for an early night, ready for our early start the next day. The next morning, we went on a boat tour of the nearby Ballestas Islands, colloquially known as 'the poor man's Galapagos'. On this fascinating trip, we saw penguins, seals and an abundance birds (Figure 1). It was a fantastic start to the trip.



Figure 1: Ballestas Islands

After our impressive boat trip, we caught our next Peru Hop bus and headed to Huacachina, South America's only natural desert oasis (Figure 2)! It was exactly what we had hoped for, a small oasis surrounded by endless sand dunes towering hundreds of feet high, quite the contrast to our previous night by the sea! As soon as we arrived, we set off on a sand-buggy and sandboarding tour of the dunes (Figure 3). Definitely the most adrenaline pumping, thrilling moment of our trip – the sand-buggy ride was just like a rollercoaster! Although sandboarding didn't turn out to be my forté, just watching the sunset over the dunes made the whole experience truly magical.



Figure 2: Huacachina Oasis Town



Figure 3: Sand-buggying through the desert



Figure 4: Nazca Lines

At midday on our third day, we caught our first overnight bus to Arequipa. Fortunately, the bus was well equipped with reclining seats, blankets and films, making this overnight bus rather pleasant! We even stopped for a buffet dinner organised by the bus company, giving us the chance to meet our bus companions who came from all over the world. This trip was also broken up by a brief stop at a viewing tower where we viewed the Nazca Lines; large ancient symbols carved into the Nazca Desert, which have been naturally preserved, due to the dry, windless region (Figure 4). They are believed to be religious symbols, created by the Nazca culture between 500 BCE and 500 CE. It really was an impressive site. We arrived in Arequipa at 5am the next day, giving us the whole day to explore Peru's 'most beautiful' city. After checking into our hostel and indulging in the most incredible banana pancakes for breakfast, we joined a free-walking tour of the city. This three-hour walking tour covered all corners of the city, giving us the chance to explore all sorts of areas we never would have discovered had we been left to our own devices. After spending the day walking endlessly around the city, making sure we had covered absolutely everything there was to do, we had a sunset drink at a rooftop bar overlooking the main square. It was in this moment, looking out over the towering volcanoes that surround the city and the huge cathedral that dominated the main square, where I was truly able to appreciate the beauty of Arequipa (Figure 5).



Figure 5: Arequipa's cathedral with volcanoes behind

Bright and early the next morning, we caught our next bus to Cusco. This was our longest bus ride of the trip, a staggering 16 hours! Late that night we arrived in Cusco where we were to spend a whole four days acclimatising (as Cusco is at an altitude of 3400m) in preparation for our five-day trek. Cusco is such a fantastic, vibrant city filled with markets, restaurants and Inca sites. On our first morning in Cusco, we headed straight to the markets and kitted ourselves out with alpaca jumpers, hats, gloves, Peruvian trousers, you name it, we had it all. We then went to explore some traditional Peruvian cuisine including alpaca burgers and my favourite dish, 'lomo saltado' which was simply rice, onions and beef strips. Guinea Pig is another Peruvian dish that I just couldn't bring myself to eat as it was served as a whole Guinea Pig, including their teeth and nails! We then spent the rest of our time exploring the churches, scouting out view points and we even did a 'Sacred Valley of the Incas' day trip. This gave us the chance to learn about the Inca culture, which is all about worshipping the 'Sun Gods'. I was fascinated by the fact that the Incas built these impressive terraces (Figure 6) and temples



Figure 6: Incan terraces on the Sacred Valley trip

without machinery and cement, the Incas simply fit the huge slabs of rock perfectly together by hand. I don't think I'll ever understand how this was achieved.

After our restful four days in Cusco, we set off on the Salkantay Trek – a five-day trek that involved camping each night, ending in Machu Picchu. The trek was definitely one of the highlights of the trip. The first day and a half of the trek involved an ascent up to 4600m where we braced wind chills into the negatives and snow (Figure 7)! However, by the end of the second day we had descended to 2900m and by the third and fourth days we were walking through jungle, where it was baking hot. Overall, we walked 80km over the five days, averaging about seven hours of walking a day, quite an achievement! On the fifth day, we had an early 4am start to walk up 1800 steps in the dark to reach Machu Picchu before the crowds arrived. Being in Machu Picchu at sunrise was one of the most incredible experiences I have had, it was so much more impressive than I ever could have imagined (Figure 8). We spent six hours walking around Machu Picchu, just absorbing it all. It really was a very surreal moment.



Figure 7: The highest point of our trip at 4600m!



Figure 8: Machu Picchu at 6am

After our trip to Machu Picchu, we headed back to Cusco for one last night, and then caught our fifth Peru Hop bus to Lake Titicaca – the world's highest navigable lake. We arrived early in the morning, after another overnight bus, and didn't waste any time as we went straight on a boat trip to the 'floating islands' (Figure 9). These islands are manmade islands, made from straw, where indigenous Peruvians who wear traditional dress live a simple life without electricity. It was fascinating to see.



Figure 9: The Floating Islands

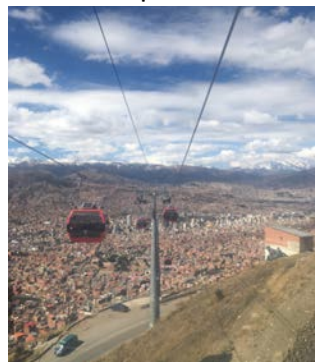


Figure 10: La Paz's cable cars

Our Lake Titicaca stop concluded our time in Peru, as the next day we crossed the Peruvian/Bolivian border on the 'Bolivia Hop' bus, to reach Bolivia's capital, La Paz. At 3650m, La Paz is the highest capital in the world. In La Paz, cable cars are used as a form of public transport, it really was a very unique way of touring the city, particularly as the cable cars gave us the opportunity to see just how vast the city of La Paz is (Figure 10). Following our short, but sufficient, visit to La Paz, we took an overnight bus to the Bolivian

salt flats (Salar de Uyuni), for the final leg of our trip. Salar de Uyuni is the world's largest salt flat, at 10,582 square km, and were formed by the evaporation of an ancient lake which left a layer of salt several metres thick. This ethereal landscape was extraordinary, just endless salt as far as the eye could see. Due to rain a few days before our trip, we were very lucky that there was a thin layer of water on the salt flats which meant that in some areas, we were able to see perfect reflections (Figure 11), making it impossible to determine where the salt flats ended and the sky started. We ended this tour by visiting small lagoons just South of the salt flats, which were home to pink flamingos (Figure 12). This really was the perfect end to the perfect trip.



Figure 11: Reflections on the salt flats



Figure 12: Flamingos

Having concluded the final leg of our trip, we made our way back to Lima to get our return flight home to London. This three-day journey (which comprised 24 hours on buses and 13 hours on plane, as well as a quick stop off in Lima to explore the hustle and bustle of Peru's capital) left me a lot of time to reflect on this once in a life time trip. In just one month, I was able to experience a vast array of contrasting landscapes ranging from desert to jungle and bustling cities to the peaceful Lake Titicaca; I was only able to truly appreciate this diversity upon reflection. I am so grateful to have been given this opportunity to travel by the Girton College Travel Award; it really was a trip of a lifetime.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'G. [unclear]', written on a light-colored background.