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Travel

Retreat to a Different Time at PUQIO in the Central Andes of Peru

Elia Essen October 8, 2024

Perched 12,000 feet above sea level on a remote stretch of the Andes in the Colca Valley, it's easy to become enraptured in all that lies below PUQIO — the snaking Rio Colca, a vast expanse of undulating grasses, and the occasional hut that dots the unspoiled landscape. But don't forget to look up to the vast sky overhead. You might just spot the impressive 10-foot wingspan of an Andean condor, one of the largest flighted birds in the world, gliding on a mountain breeze.

While many visitors flock to overcrowded condor sighting spots, the team at southern Peru's new tented camp, PUQIO, take a more organic approach, pointing out the imposing vultures to their guests as they ride on horseback past hissing geysers, trek to remote caves, or embark on one of their many other excursions. It's an attitude that carries into everything the resort does: authenticity over contrivance, raw over artificial, and quietude over chaos. And while visitors certainly do find themselves lulled into relaxation and mental serenity, PUQIO is a place for cultural immersion as much as a vacation.



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PUQIO, southern Peru.

In southern Peru, three hours north of Arequipa and one and a half kilometres from the tiny town of Yanque, the eight-room resort opened last fall as the first tented camp in the country. It's just the latest jewel in the crown of boutique Peruvian hotelier Andean. Named for the Quechuan word for water source, PUQIO offers its guests an all-inclusive retreat where they can experience first-hand the Andean way of life and all that the Colca Valley has to offer, without sacrificing comfort.

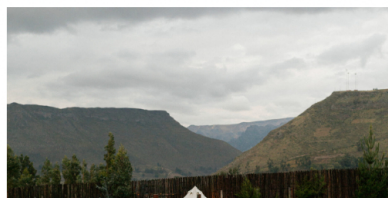
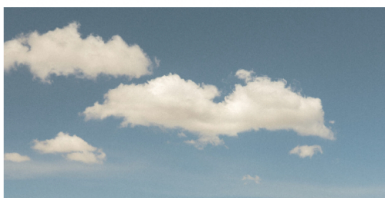
"My dream is to create an infatuation, for you to experience something that you never thought you were going to live or see," says Sandra Masias, Andean product and experience manager and sister of its founder. "We're talking about purity. We're talking about a singularity."



PUQIO, southern Peru.

PUQIO quickly gets to the heart of what is essential to a high-end stay and cuts out the rest, balancing modern-day amenities with an age-old sense of community for a getaway that is simultaneously no-frills and luxurious. Blending into their surroundings, the primitive structures give their inhabitants the feeling of exploration and connection, with no hint of the meticulously designed interiors that wait inside.

"One of our purposes, and I think everybody's purpose today, is to leave the smallest footprint possible," Masias says. "Tourism is an industry that destroys destinations. The amount of garbage, the amount of people, the amount of cars — it's very difficult to maintain an area. So, it's nice when you see a tent because it gives you a sense of responsibility." Tents also trigger universal childhood memories, she explains, bringing to mind days spent exploring, trying new things, and wondering at the world, a sentiment PUQIO seeks to elicit in its guests.





PUQIO, southern Peru.

The hotel's accommodations include four rooms in adobe huts and four free-standing tents (two each of the basic Carpa tents and the more spacious Carpa Refugio), all of which include a wood stove, a sitting area, a fully equipped bathroom, and a private terrace. Appointed with plush rugs and comfortable furniture (no fold-up chairs or camping mats to be found here), each enjoys views of the surrounding valley. The tents' outdoor clawfoot bathtubs make for a particularly serene spot to convene with nature. After a long day of adventuring, sinking into the fluffy white beds — Masias's favourite part of the property — is heavenly, not just for cradling weary muscles but for their vistas of the Colca Valley beyond.

Following a nightly sundowner, a meal rooted in the traditions of the valley is served using local ingredients, cooked over an open flame, and enjoyed family-style alongside other guests. "When we open the clay oven at a certain time, we wish for all the guests to be there so we can share one meal," Masias explains, noting that dietary restrictions are accommodated.



PUQIO, southern Peru.

Adventure and learning are an integral part of a stay at PUQIO, and a diverse range of short, half- and full-day excursions are included, curated with the help of an exploration adviser to create a personalized itinerary. Be sure to take it easy the first day; the elevation is deceptively extreme, making physical activities extra difficult if you're not acclimatized. From exploring the ruins of the pre-Incan Chimpa Fortress to observing Pinchollo Geyser to studying ancient plant wisdom from an herbalist, each outing incorporates multiple elements, such as learning history, experiencing nature, eating local food, and interacting with the community. The aim is to provide visitors with a holistic view of life in the Colca Valley.

"When you go to Machu Picchu, you go to see Machu Picchu. That's your objective. Go up the ruins, take a selfie, and come down. Everybody does that," Masias says. "When you go to PUQIO, to Colca Canyon, you want to see the culture and to observe and understand how people live around a canyon that is so deep. Everything that we do is related to doing a little bit of everything." Between the immersion in nature and the camaraderie built over shared activities and meals, PUQIO could well be an elevated summer camp for grown-ups. For its guests, it's a reset, devoid of the noise and the excess of everyday life.





"It's like a trip into the past, where you still see people living like they used to 100 years ago and that's very impressive," she says. "It's primary, it's pure. It's something that is not going to last. I don't think that in 20 years I would be able to say this, but you can still find places in Peru, and this is one of them."

While it may be fleeting, for now, PUQIO beckons travellers to a landscape of grassy planes, sloping mountains and volcanoes, and rich history, under the flight path of the condors, inviting each guest to find comfort in a simpler way of life, if only for a few days.



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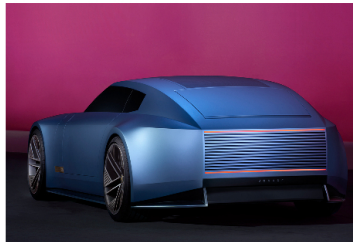
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