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Lake at the top of the world – the magic of Titicaca

A kayaking excursion to a floating island takes on a dreamlike tinge nearly 4km above sea level

Paul Richardson YESTERDAY

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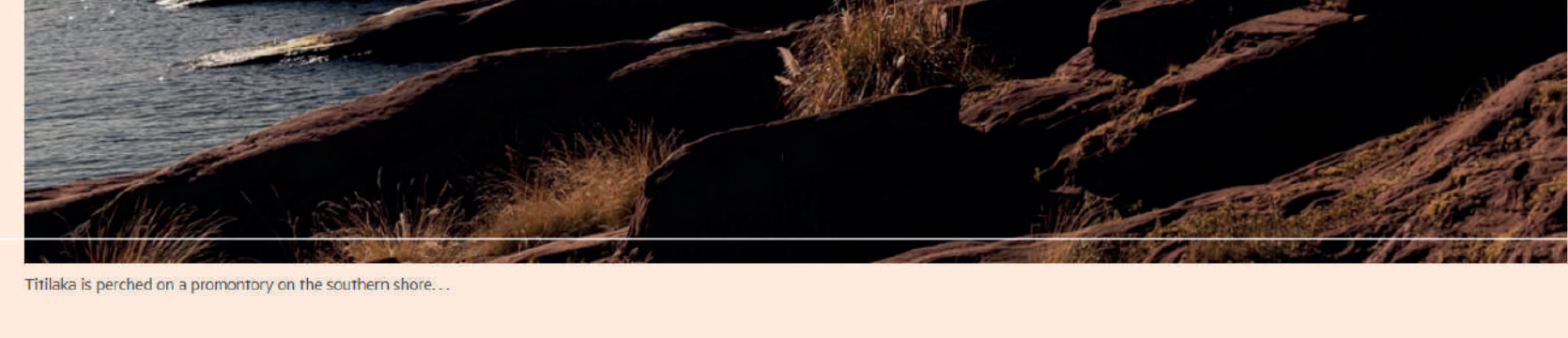
“Show me a better window.” A friend had laid down the challenge on Instagram with a golden view of a Tuscan cornfield.

Here was one that trumped hers. It gathered into its plate-glass rectangle a steel-blue immensity stretching almost to the horizon, inviting you to lose yourself in the interplay of light and shadow on the canvas of the water. Clumps of violet-grey storm clouds rolled slowly across the horizon; slanting streaks of rain were lit up as if by a spotlight from the wings.

Titicaca: if once it catches your imagination, it never lets go. As a child I laughed at the lake’s comedy name, and fantasised about the legends of ancient cities and Inca treasures sunk in its depths. Poring over the atlas in my fourth-form geography class, I was awed by the notion of a navigable lake almost 300 metres deep, cradled in a mountain plateau nearly three times higher than the UK’s highest peak.

Seeing it decades later through the window of my southern-shore hotel, I was awed by the reality too. Perhaps because I eventually made it there during the halcyon days before coronavirus knocked the world askew and Peru’s borders clanged shut, a peculiar intensity clings to the memory of my days on the lake, as when a powerful dream stays in your head for the rest of the day.

I made the long journey from Cuzco to Puno by PeruRail train, rumbaling at a gentle pace over the bleak plains of the Altiplano while, at my upholstered seat, lunch was served to the strains of a cocktail piano. At the railway’s highest point, where the train stopped and I got out to squint into the diamond-bright air at just over 4,300 metres above sea level, streams of glacier-melt made white skeins of waterfalls down the mountainside. From Puno, a scrappy, charmless, neon-lit city by the lake, I made a swift escape, arriving at Titilaka – not to be confused with Titicaca – just before nightfall.



Titilaka is perched on a promontory on the southern shore...



...and boasts extensive views across Peru’s high-altitude lake

A boxy, Modernist structure in glass and concrete, dramatically sited on a lonely promontory, Titilaka is one of a small stable of stylish Peruvian lodgings run by hotelier Ignacio Macías. The fun starts inside with the eclectic furnishings of colour-stripped Peruvian carpets, antiques and cool modern furniture, and the open-plan sitting room with its wood-burning stove and mind-expanding lake views. The Relais & Châteaux silkiness of the service is almost surreal in this remote location. The chef’s trout ceviche was so good I ate it three nights running.

Among the hotel’s various suggestions for local adventures and excursions, from cycling and birdwatching to a cultural jaunt around the crumbling colonial Baroque churches of Juli, Lampa and Pomata, there was one that had caught my eye: a safari by kayak around the lake’s intricate coastline of inlets and outerops, its curious islands and idiosyncratic cultures.

Last night’s storms had rolled away, and a soft-edged dawn light promised a sparkling day. With Rubén Mamani, my guide and captain, I set off as one that had the hotel’s little jetty in a double kayak, slipping into water as smooth as mercury. Our route – including, I confess, an interlude on a motor launch to cover the distance – would take us north around the Capachica Peninsula, skirting the protected national reserve where the Uro peoples live on floating islands fashioned from the *totora* reed.



Titilaka offers a safari by kayak around the lake’s intricate coastline © Paul Richardson

We paddled away and my gaze drifted down to the water, gin-clear like a rock pool, with fronds of weed gently waving but no other scuttling life down there that I could see. In fact, the lake is home to no fewer than 26 species of fish and about 70 of birds, including the flightless Titicaca grebe, said Rubén, but its most famous inhabitant is a giant and spectacularly ugly frog, *Telmatobius euleus*, weighing in at up to 1kg.

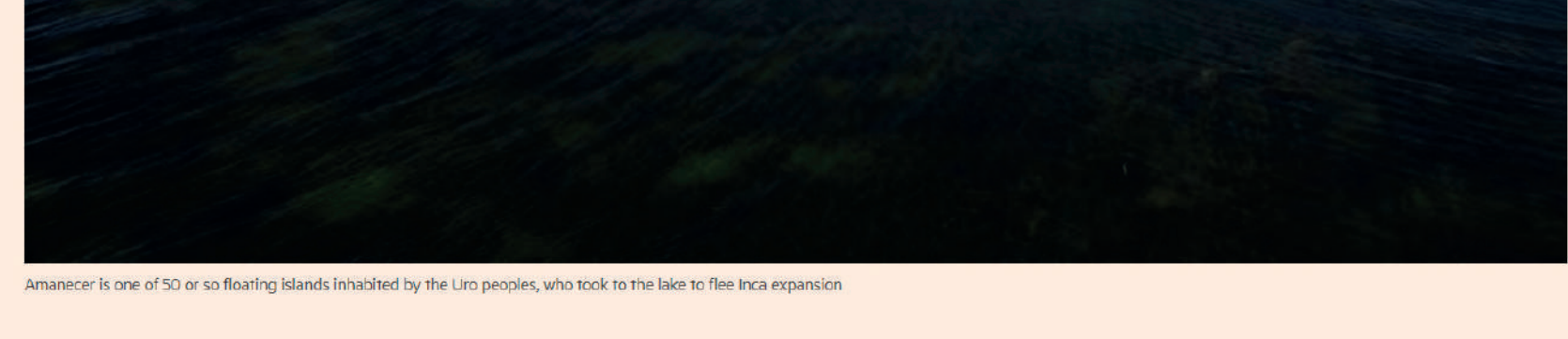
Silence fell on the kayak, broken only by the rhythmic plashing of oars. The sun’s rays at nearly 4km above sea level were hot and prickly on the skin. Along the shoreline I saw placid inlets, adobe huts with thatched roofs, patchwork squares of potato and quinoa plantations, and orange-flowered *kjolle* trees stunted by the cold and altitude.

“A canoe moored at the island’s edge was as graceful as a Venetian gondola reimagined in straw

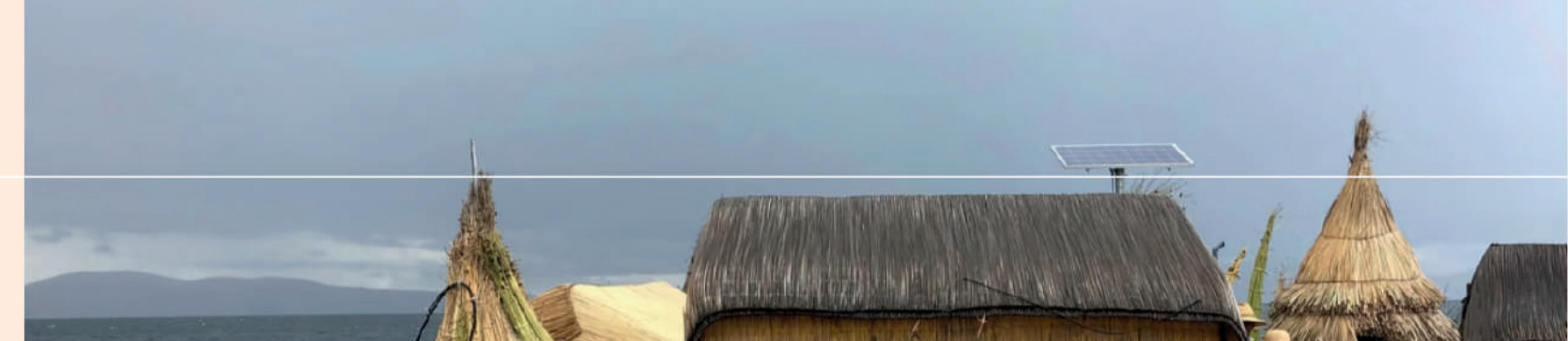
I rummaged in my memory for somewhere to compare this landscape with. The Scottish Highlands, perhaps: those enormous skies, the stark beauty, the cold, clear water. But no mountains loomed over this great Andean loch – only bare-faced granite hills skulking by the shore, as if at these dizzying altitudes it would be asking too much to go any higher.

After an hour of hard paddling a sliver of land came into view. This wasn’t quite dry land but a man-made atoll where three families subsist on whatever the lake’s ecosystem can provide. “Amanecer” (“Dawn”) is one of the 50 or so floating islands inhabited by the Uros ethnic group, which fled the mainland in the face of Inca expansion, kept themselves apart, and grew into an extreme example of adaptability to the natural environment.

While Rubén tied the kayak to a post I gingerly disembarked. It was unsettling to walk around on a surface that yielded slightly at each step, like a mattress. The island is in essence a platform made of blocks of *totora* root lashed together and covered with a thick layer of cut reed. But *totora* serves for much more than island-building. A canoe moored at the island’s edge was as graceful as a Venetian gondola reimagined in straw. A group of women in garish pink and green Andean skirts were squatting around a clay hob poking sticks of *totora* into a smoking fire.

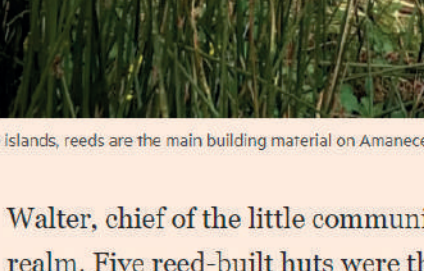


Amanecer is one of 50 or so floating islands inhabited by the Uro peoples, who took to the lake to flee Inca expansion



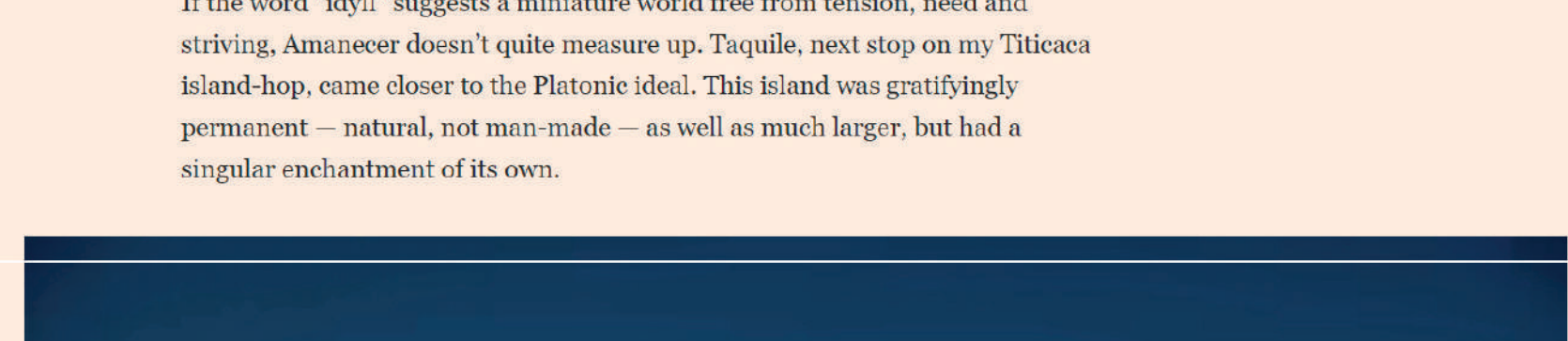
As with the other Uro islands, reeds are the main building material on Amanecer © Paul Richardson

Walter, chief of the little community, was pleased to show me around his realm. Five reed-built huts were the extent of the built environment; another hut served as the community kitchen. Laid out on coloured cloths were the basic ingredients of the Uros larder, namely *chuño* potatoes freeze-dried in the dry Andean air, oca and *mashua* roots, duck eggs and mummified waterbirds. A few small catfish swam in a bowl. Outside the kitchen door an elderly man sat on the reed-bed grinding maize on a flat black stone. In a bed of earth sunk into the reed platform, potatoes were growing.



Living on what is basically a wickerwork basket may be picturesque, suggested Walter, but presents certain inconveniences. A storm such as last night’s may cast the whole island adrift from its moorings. Drownings are common. The three metre-thick platform requires constant maintenance, and naked flames are an ever-present danger. In case of emergency, a prehistoric Nokia is the community’s single link to the outside world.

If the word “idyll” suggests a miniature world free from tension, need and striving, Amanecer doesn’t quite measure up. Taquile, next stop on my Titicaca island-hop, came closer to the Platonic ideal. This island was gratifyingly permanent – natural, not man-made – as well as much larger, but had a singular enchantment of its own.



Made out of the same type of reed as the artificial islands, Uro boats have similar lines to Venetian gondolas

We approached from the southern end, where steep slopes of pinkish rock were clad in ragged squares of potato field and pasture. In the minuscule harbour where we docked, two rowing boats bobbed in water of a sapphire blue that made me think of some rocky Mediterranean cove. Up on the hillside, stone paths wound among meadows grazed by flocks of dwarf sheep. (Taquile’s 2,200 residents get around on foot, the island neither having, nor needing, cars or roads.) It may have been the effect of my oxygen-depleted brain, but there was something hallucinatory about the gaudy flowers and butterflies, the gurgling streams, the patches of violet-flowered potato against the big blue backdrop of the lake.

From the few locals we met on the meandering paths, I learnt about the rich *taquileño* traditions, including the textile art that is recognised under Unesco’s Intangible Cultural Heritage scheme. Island society is based on collective endeavour and Inca morality with its three tenets “*ama suya, ama liulla, ama queulla*” (Quechua for “you shall not steal, lie or be lazy”). Social and marital status are embodied in a complex dress code. A man in a black Homburg hat and white cotton shirt came ambling past; a person of importance, whispered Rubén. The landscape had a *Through the Looking Glass* whimsy and charm. Rustic wooden gates, opening on to handkerchief-sized vegetable plots bounded by knee-high walls, had hinges made from the soles of old shoes.

If this was Wonderland, lunch would have to be at Alice’s restaurant. At the house of Alicia Cruz, where Titilaka likes to take guests for private visits, the daughter of the hostess came out to greet us in a black shawl with bright-coloured pom-poms (the sign of an unmarried girl). Shyly twisting wool on a bobbin, Cintia guided us to a table in the garden and her mother brought us island-grown potatoes with *uchucutu* sauce of herbs and fresh cheese, grilled lake trout, and juicy Cape gooseberries for dessert.

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Afterwards I walked to the end of the grassy garden where the hillside fell away towards the land’s edge. From here the lake was laid out below in its full majesty, the needle-sharp sun picking out details on the distant shore, the water around the island shimmering with that counter-intuitive Mediterranean blue. Down at the harbour my kayak quietly waited for the journey back to Titilaka.

So much beauty was intoxicating. Life on this enchanted isle, like much else about Peru’s mythic mountain lake, seemed to blur the boundaries between reality and dream.

Details

Paul Richardson was a guest of Scott Dunn (scottdunn.com), which offers a nine-night trip from £8,395 per person, including three nights at the Hotel B in Lima, three at the Explora Sacred Valley and three at Hotel Titilaka, with various art and cultural tours, kayaking on Lake Titicaca, flights from London and private transfers

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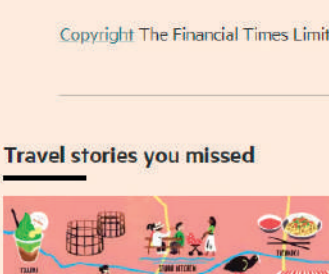
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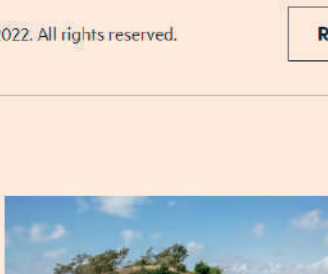
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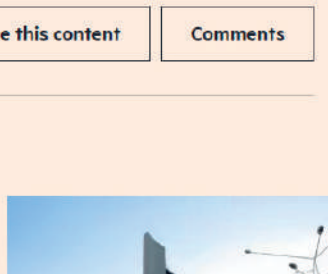
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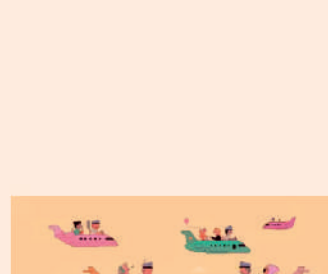
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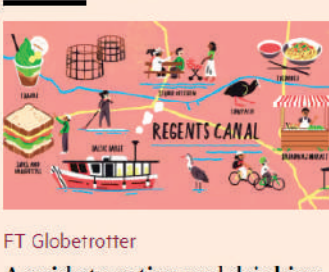
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