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This 3,200-square-mile Lake Straddles Two South American Countries and Is Brimming With Ancient History

On the border of Peru and Bolivia, Lake Titicaca is the place to explore Indigenous culture, past and present.

By **Gabriel Urza** | Published on January 19, 2024



Islands made of totora reeds on Lake Titicaca. PHOTO: WESTEND61/OFFSET/SHUTTERSTOCK

It was early November when my wife, Raija, and I climbed aboard an early-morning bus for Lake Titicaca. I'd been living in Arequipa, Peru, for five months as a Fulbright Scholar, researching a book about an American explorer. As I neared the end of my grant, Raija and I wanted to visit the famous 3,200-square-mile lake that straddles the border of Peru and Bolivia and is considered the birthplace of Incan civilization.

As we drove inland toward the lake's northwestern shore, red dust kicked up off the rutted dirt road. We passed small fields where farmers hand-planted potatoes, quinoa, and barley, while bands of sheep and alpaca grazed on the stubble of last season's crops.

When we left the bus six hours later, we were blasted by winds from Bolivia that whipped up whitecaps on the lake. At 12,500 feet above sea level, the air felt thin and crisp. On the horizon, the Andes Mountains reared up into the sky. After the traffic-choked streets of Arequipa, the first thing I noticed was the quiet.

We spent our first two nights at [Titilaka](#), an 18-room lodge on a red sandstone peninsula near the town of Puno. The interiors are decorated in a contemporary style and accented with wood-and-cowhide chairs and wool rugs.



A corner room in Titilaka. PHOTO: COURTESY OF ANDEAN EXPERIENCE

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Most of the guests were out for the day — on excursions to a nearby island or to markets — and the hotel felt pleasantly empty. Raija and I sipped sweet iced tea flavored with *muña* (Andean mint) as we were shown to our room, a suite with an oversize bathtub overlooking the watery expanse of Titicaca. Later I walked down a boardwalk to the edge of the lake and spent a peaceful hour in a wooden hot tub.

When we finally sat down for dinner in the dining room, I was happily tired from the long day of travel. We ate braised lamb shank and trout fresh from the lake, had a last glass of red wine, and retreated gratefully to our room.

We woke to a huge blue sky over a lake so flat and wide that it seemed to disappear into the horizon. After breakfast — red cactus juice and a smorgasbord of tamales, fresh fruits, breads, yogurt, and avocado — Raija and I took an aluminum canoe from the boathouse and paddled 20 yards offshore. The water below us was cold and clear. We crossed a small channel to explore an islet where our only company was a pair of white Andean geese.

In the afternoon our guide from Titilaka, Alberth Ramos, led us to Molloco, an archaeological site in the foothills of the Andes a half-hour drive away. This group of chullpas — stone structures about 20 feet tall — is all that remains of a cemetery of the Lupaca people, a kingdom dating from the 11th to the 15th centuries that is commonly described as “pre-Incan.” At one time, the chullpas were home to the mummified bodies of nobility, but they were plundered years ago. “When the colonial people came to the high plateau in the 1500s, they destroyed all the buildings looking for gold and silver,” Ramos said.

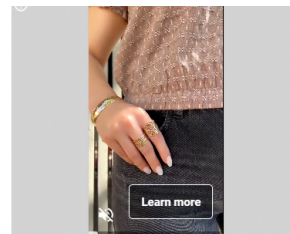


From left: An Uros woman on one of the islands; a Titilaka cruiser, available for excursions on the lake. PHOTO: MARTA TUCCI

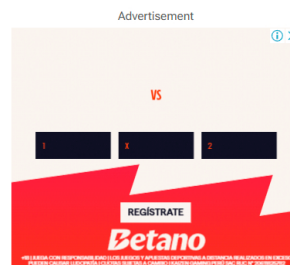
We drove another half-hour to reach Aramu Muru, a massive sandstone wall with a mysterious door frame carved into its center. Ramos told us the legend surrounding its origins: an Incan priest fleeing the Spanish had mysteriously disappeared through the doorway and into another dimension. It was a quiet, eerie place. At the threshold of the frame, people had left coca leaves and plastic cups of red wine as offerings to Incan gods.

The next day we left Titilaka around noon, taking the hotel van to a port north of Puno. There we boarded a small, covered motorboat that carried us to our next stay: one of the 120 floating reed islands on Lake Titicaca that are home to the Uros community, where Carlos Eduardo Lujano Suaña and his family rent lakefront rooms through [Airbnb](#).

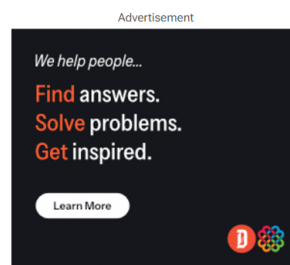
The 2,000-strong Uros people have been living on these totora-reed islands for hundreds of years, though today their homes are equipped with hot-water heaters and solar panels. On an afternoon tour, we stopped at the floating workshop of Noe and Isaac Coila Lujano, master boatbuilders who were at work on a 20-foot catamaran, using traditional tools to mold bundles of reeds into a swooping prow. I remembered a theory I'd once heard — that ancient people had used similar boats to cross the Pacific Ocean, long before Europeans arrived in the Americas.



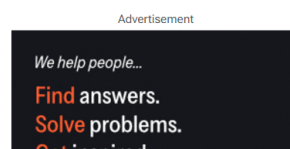
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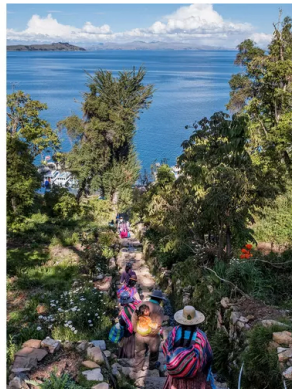
The village of Yumani, on the terraced hillsides of Isla del Sol. PHOTO: BRUNO M/SHUTTERSTOCK

"Do you think people could have sailed across the Pacific on one of these?" I asked.

Noe considered the question. "Sure," he said. "But you'd have to be careful." We laughed, both perhaps reflecting on the endless dangers: storms, dehydration, starvation — not to mention sharks.

As the sun set, the water reflected pink and orange and the reeds of the marshland became illuminated in gold. After a comforting home-cooked dinner — grilled chicken breast and french fries — we spent a cozy night under a half-dozen blankets, warmed by two-liter soda bottles of hot water wrapped in alpaca-wool socks.

The next morning we took a boat to the mainland, where we caught a bus for the two-hour ride to the Bolivian border. After clearing customs, we hopped on another ferry from the town of Copacabana to Isla del Sol, a five-square-mile island in Lake Titicaca that's so remote it takes 90 minutes to reach. The place is rich in Andean mythology: the deities Manco Cápac and Mama Ocllo, the first Inca and his wife, are said to have been born there.



From left: One of Isla del Sol's resident llamas; descending a footpath on Lake Titicaca's Isla del Sol. PHOTO: FROM LEFT: ALIZ KRAMMER/ALIZSWONDERLAND.COM; JEOFFREY GUILLEMARD/HAYTHAM-REA/REDUX

We disembarked on the southern side of the island, passing an Incan stone ruin before making the short hike to our bed and breakfast, a family-run property called [Utasawa](#) in the small town of Yumani. (Cars aren't allowed on the island; people get around on steep stone footpaths.) As we walked, we saw farmers working the terraced hillsides with hand tools.

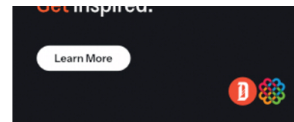
In the evening, we hiked to Las Velas, an unassuming, candlelit restaurant that overlooks Kona Bay. Chef Pablo Callsaya steamed whole lake trout in *muña*, which he called the "special touch." After dinner, we walked the 20 minutes back to our hotel by starlight — at our 12,000-foot elevation, the galaxies were startlingly bright.

The next day, we hiked to the northern end of the island and back, following a path that passed pre-Incan ruins and hidden bays with white-sand beaches. We arrived in Yumani just in time to catch the ferry to Copacabana. As the boat bounced in the chop, the snow-covered Andes in the distance seemed to float over Lake Titicaca. I was struck by the sense that Raija and I were in a place that somehow transcended time, and that our days there were an infinitesimally small drop in this lake's ancient, storied depths.

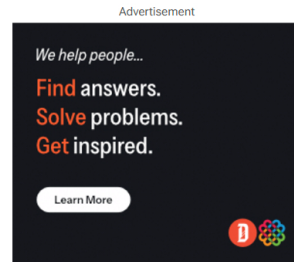
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T+L A-List travel advisor [Jen Richt](#) can design four-night trips that include island excursions, such as traditional reed weaving, and cycling day trips with stops at local villages from \$4,000 per person, including accommodations at Titilaka and transportation.

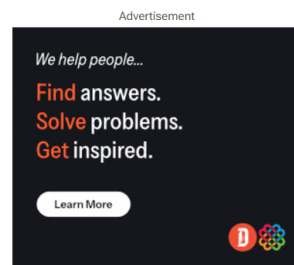
A version of this story first appeared in the February 2024 issue of Travel + Leisure under the headline "High-Water Mark."



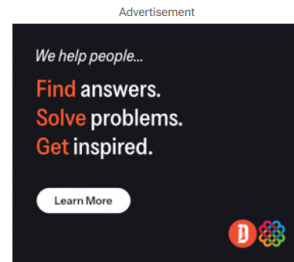
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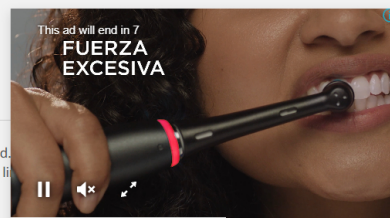
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