

Discovering Peru: Lima and Cusco

by Douglas Famy, PassPorter Guest Contributor

The sights that most North Americans and Europeans see in Peru can be found along what is called "The Gringo Trail." Top among these destinations is the gateway to the rest of the country, Lima, Peru. If you are a fan of Spanish colonial architecture, then Lima will be a goldmine. There are numerous churches throughout the central city with incredible baroque detailing. I recommend visiting the Monasterio de San Francisco. If you are into walking a bit on the creepy side you can enjoy exploring the monastery's dusty catacombs. Plaza Mayor, previously Plaza de Armas, is the heart of Lima. It is here where you will find the architectural treasures of the Palacio de Gobierno (the residence of the Peruvian President), the Palacio Arzobispal (Archbishop's Palace), and La Catedral de Lima. However, surrounding these nuggets of wonder is a grimy, dirty, gritty city. If your time is limited I would recommend skipping the central part of Lima. I thoroughly agree with Herman Melville when he said that Lima is "the saddest city on Earth."

I always thought that experiencing local festivities to be a plus. I arrived in Central Lima during the largest religious celebration of the year, El Señor de los Milagros (Lord of the Miracles). The streets of Lima were clogged with attendees. It was wall to wall people. I discovered that my enjoyment of being part of a local festival doesn't always coincide with my own preferences. It turns out I am not a fan of being packed in the streets of Lima like a sardine in a can and having people shove and push me around.

I did enjoy a respite inside the Gran Hotel Bolívar. It was like taking a step back in time to the 1920s. There was a wonderful stained glass dome. If you like your adult beverages to pack a punch, then I highly recommend indulging in the local beverage, the Pisco Sour. It is made from fermented grapes, lime or lemon juice, bitters, and a frothy whipped egg on top. The Gran Hotel Bolívar specializes in an extra large version called the cathedral. I'm telling you, Pisco Sours could become addictive.

When you visit Lima spend most of your time exploring the Pacific oceanside communities of Miraflores, Barranco, and Chorrillos. I took a fantastic bike tour that I can't praise enough. Bike Tours of Lima required no special skills at all. One member of our tour hadn't ridden a bicycle in about 25 years and had no difficulties. Our tour just pedaled our way around these three charming, character-filled neighborhoods. Our bilingual guide was incredibly friendly and informative, and the

public parks and green spaces were so much fun to discover.

Lima is considered a culinary capitol of South America. It is especially known for ceviche. Ceviche is a dish of seafood that is "cooked" by the chemical reaction that takes place by mixing the seafood with citrus juice. I was lucky enough to enjoy some really memorable meals. If you are a foodie, then you want to make a visit to Miraflores in Lima.

Cusco was the "navel of the world" to the Incas. It was the spiritual center and source of life for their civilization. Cusco is spelled a variety of different ways, primarily because the Incas did not have a written form of language. The spelling is based on Spaniards' interpretation of the Quechua language that they heard in the 16th century. Frequently you will see the city spelled as Cuzco, Qosqo or Qosq'o. If you decide to visit one of the newly-named New Seven Wonders of the World, Machu Picchu, you will undoubtedly be paying a visit to Cusco.

Cusco may serve as a home base for not only Machu Picchu but to explore other fascinating archeological sites in the region known as the Sacred Valley. If you are in the area on a Sunday, you can enjoy the terraces of the local market of Pisac. Other sites in the area include the terraces of Moray, the salt pans of Salinas, and the archeological sites of Saqsaywaman, Q'enqo, Pukapukara, Tambomachay, and the Ollantaytambo ruins.

I found Cusco's old city incredibly charming. I will never forget my night climbing uphill through cobblestone streets to reach the San Blas neighborhood, only to misread my menu and order a pricey bottle of Peruvian wine. The streets were lined with artisan shops selling well-crafted Peruvian wares. In fact, if shopping is your thing, then Cusco is the mecca for shoppers in Peru. I have never seen so many shops ranging from incredible hand-made treasures to tacky-tacky souvenirs.

I was treated to a personally guided tour of the most beautiful church in Cusco, Iglesia de la Compañía de Jesús. The Jesuits were not in favor at the time of the settling of Peru by the Spaniards. While the city's immense La Catedral was incredibly wide, the Jesuits decided not to be outdone and made their church the highest. My student guide told me stories to illustrate the incredible altar, and he took me down into the catacombs, up into the choir lofts, and left no nook or cranny unearthed.

As I said, La Catedral, the city's main cathedral, is immense and all I could think of was how dramatic this place was. Definitely step in to see the innumerable examples of the Cusco School of Art. My favorite was

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the painting by Marcos Zapata of the Last Supper, where Christ and his Apostles are eating roast guinea pig, peppers, and Andean cheese while drinking out of Inca keros vessels. Could they be having the local Chincha (corn beer) instead of wine?

My favorite museum was the Museo de Arte Precolombino. It was small and easy to tour in under an hour. All of the exhibits are explained in Spanish, French, and English. I found it startling how so much of the ceramics and textiles reminded me of what would be popular in a modern showroom at home. For history buffs, a visit to the Museo Inka is a must.

Tourists can not buy individual entrance tickets to most sights in Cusco. Instead, you need to buy a Boleto Turistico. Each sight can only be visited once. You can also get a ticket that will include archeological sites near Cusco and around the Sacred Valley. These are available from the tourism office in Cusco, and at many hotels in the city.

Get out of your own backyard and gain new perspectives by visiting other cultures and seeing how they do things.

About The Author: Douglas Famy is an active member of the PassPorter message board community hailing from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He is currently looking forward to a Western Caribbean Cruise with Honduras, Belize, and Cozumel, Mexico as ports of call followed by Halloween festivities in New Orleans, Louisiana.

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