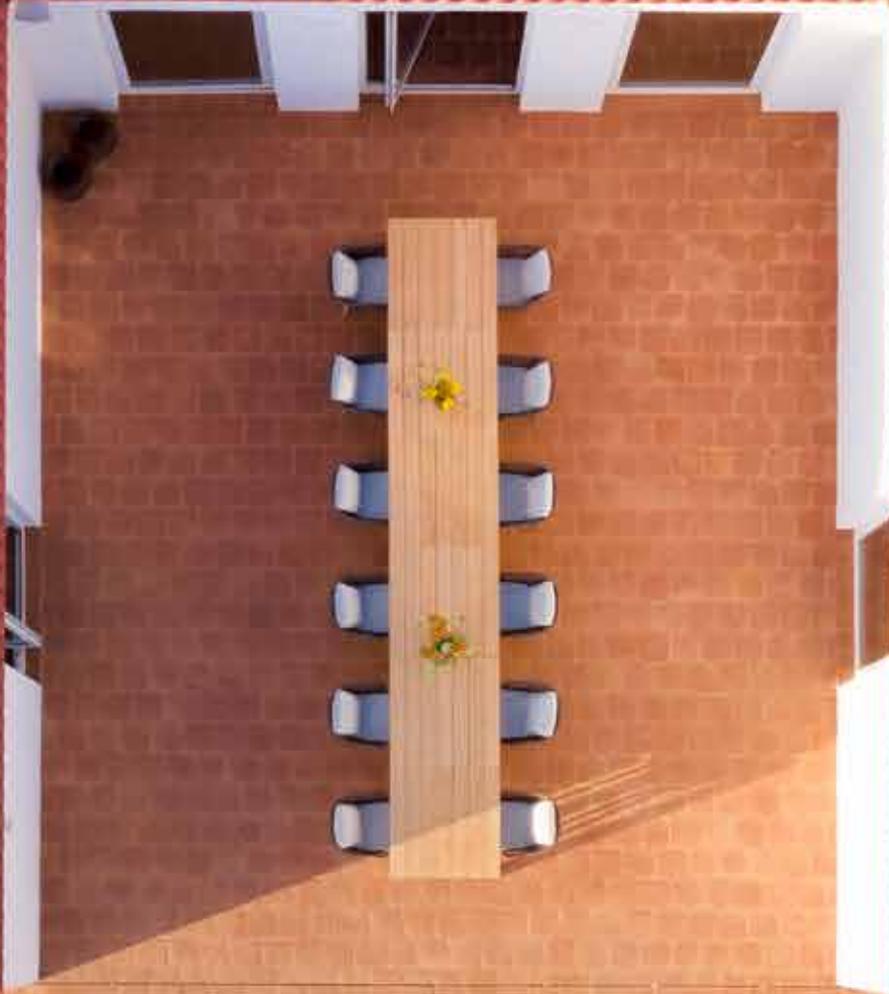


AUTUMN 2020

DEPARTURES



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Peru's Hidden Gem Framed by volcanoes and suffused with charm, Arequipa's unique architectural heritage and lively culinary scene make it a destination worth a detour.

by Juliana A Saad



THE MOST recognised Peruvian hotspots deserve their renown – Machu Pichu is awe-inspiring and Cusco and Lima each beguile in their own ways – but clued-up travellers are increasingly venturing to the southwest of the country, where the beautiful colonial city of Arequipa sits among picturesque volcanoes, stunning salt flats and wondrous valleys.

The White City, as it's known, was founded by the Spanish in 1540 and has been a Unesco World heritage site since 2000. Rising 2,300 metres above sea level, between the Andes and the coastal desert, this emerging destination boasts a small-town vibe with flowering courtyards and stone-carved facades alongside big-time attractions. Put on your sunhat, harness your spirit of adventure and enjoy the best-kept secret in Peru.

Left: an alfresco atmospheric lounge and a suite at the Cirqa hotel; below: view of the vast Colca Valley

Around Town

You can – and should – walk your way around the diminutive city, starting at the central Plaza de Armas, with its 18th century gardens, colonial buildings adorned with balconies and arches and the Andean-Baroque Cathedral of Arequipa, which takes on a golden tone at sunset. Behind its towers you can see the snowcapped majestic El Misti volcano. An architectural landmark stands tall just a seven-minute walk from there. The **Monastery of Santa Catalina** (santacatalina.org.pe), a citadel of 20,000 square metres, houses a labyrinth of *calles* (streets), alleys, squares, gardens, chapels and cloisters that reveal the religious and cultural past of the city. Elsewhere, places like the **Casa del Moral** (*Calle Moral, 318*) and the **Mario Vargas Llosa Museum** (*Avenida Parra 101*) tell the story of the city: the former, one of the best examples of Andean Baroque architecture, was bought by the British consul in the 1940s and is now owned by a bank and houses an exhibition space, while the latter is the home of its eponymous Arequipa native and winner of the Nobel Prize of Literature. Befitting the off-the-beaten-track nature of the city, tours are in Spanish, but the atmosphere is redolent and captivating.

Tucking In

The pleasures of the plate are to be found everywhere across the city. For true cuisine d'auteur fusing regional products with ancient Arequipan techniques, reserve a table at **Salamanto** (salamanto.com), where chef Paul Perea's two tasting menus are mindbendingly good, with dishes like alpaca loin in citrus ash. Perea, born in Arequipa, also runs a couple other eateries – Trattoria Opis and Cevicheria Litoral 480km – as well as the popular Kawsai Bar, whose rooftop is the best place for cocktails in the city. Another local star, chef Gaston Acurio, heads up **Chicha** (chicha.com.pe), where he offers another modern twist on the rich

traditional foods of Arequipa. Try the Majeño lamb, slowly cooked in the oven, and the traditional Andean corn drink from which the restaurant takes its name. Indigenous cuisine is less formal but no less taste. Drop in to a laid-back *picantería* – the best in town are **La Nueva Palomino** (*Leoncio Prado 122*) and **Victoria** (*Calle San Francisco 227*) – for delights ranging from *rocoto relleno* (stuffed pepper) served with *pastel de papa* (thin-sliced potato pie), *adobe* (rich pork stew

cooked in a clay pot over an open fire), *chupe de camarones* (shrimp soup) and a host of varieties of ceviche.

Outdoor Adventure

No trip to Arequipa is complete without a journey into the wild and wonderful surroundings. Venture to the Colca Valley, a Unesco-protected geopark, for giant Andean terraces and vertiginous canyons, while at Salinas y Aguada Blanca National Reserve, in the southern Peruvian

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The Basilica Cathedral of Arequipa; *below*: the Monastery of Santa Catalina



altiplano, the ascending path reveals magnificent landscapes and culminates in beautiful lagoons and salt flats, home to flamingos, alpacas, vicuñas, llamas and guanacos. For a spectacle that is partially manmade, the otherworldly La Ruta del Sillar centres on outsized ancient quarries with replicas of monuments carved in the remaining stone.

Retail Therapy

The region produces the best quality spun-and-processed alpaca as well as the wonderfully silky vicuña wool. Near the central plaza, a maze of cobbled streets is home to cafes and open arcades with small stores selling all manner of high- and low-quality Peruvian goods, from silver jewellery to textiles. To find the best knitwear, head to **Kuna** (kunastores.com), one of the country's leading alpaca and vicuña brands which has three locations in Arequipa; **Sol Alpaca** (solalpaca.com), which purveys sophisticated creations from its namesake wool; and **Anntarah** (anntarah.com), a fair-trade operation whose baby alpaca and Pima cotton items are produced by local families.

Bedding Down

The rustic-chic vibe of **Cirqa** (*cirqa.pe*), a Relais & Chateaux property that opened last year in the centre of Arequipa, is all-enveloping. Housed in a former monastery that dates to 1583, its 11 rooms are furnished with handmade objects and fabrics in soft colors, paired with standing baths and vaulted ceilings. All white and light, the hotel has as its central point a lounge-patio, with sofas, campfires and alpaca skins. Don't miss Alma, its glass-fronted restaurant, where Peruvian-inspired dishes – such as the hot stone river crayfish ceviche and the yellow chilli quinotto – effortlessly bring together the traditional and the modern, just like city itself.



The shrubby deserts surrounding Arequipa