

20 reasons to book a trip to Peru right now

Fresh off the red list, and celebrating 200 years of independence, Peru is a top choice for travellers this winter

By Chris Moss, DESTINATION EXPERT

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Peru



We've waited almost 20 months for the chance to return to Peru

A major exhibition at the British Museum, a stylish new hotel, a luxury cruise ship and awesome historical sites make Peru a top choice in the bicentennial year of its independence from Spain.

When the UK's red list finally expired at the end of October, it put eight Latin American countries back on the map. One of them, Peru, is celebrating the bicentennial of its Independence this year – and, if we hurry up, we can squeeze in a festive trip to toast what is, arguably, everyone's favourite South American destination.

It's not only that Machu Picchu is the most famous archaeological site in the Americas. It's also that the culture that gave rise to the citadel is still very much alive in Peruvian music, food, languages, art and design. Then there is the topography. The Andes veer close to the Pacific coast at tropical latitudes, as does the Amazon. Thus a journey from Lima to Puerto Maldonado or Chachapoyas takes travellers through a multitude of landscapes – including deserts, fertile valleys, Andean peaks and high plains and teeming headwaters – and biomes bursting with wildlife and flora.

At home in the UK, we have the perfect appetite-whetter for a trip to Peru in the shape of the British Museum's A Journey in Time exhibition, which opens on November 11. Intricate and beautiful pottery, metalwork, textiles and other artworks have been borrowed from the mother country to showcase the evolution of indigenous Peru from 2500 BCE to 1500 AD, including the Paracas, Nasca, Moche and Wari peoples – as well as the more famous Incas.

The show will feature archaeological sites well outside the tourist gauntlet of the Sacred Valley. Some of the most impressive ruins are found near to the coast – ideal for

Sacred Valley, some of the most impressive ruins are found near to the coast, ideal for road trips and easy to combine with beaches and pleasant seaside towns. We've waited almost 20 months for the chance to return to Peru; here are as many reasons to go right now, before the rush, before Cusco and the Unesco sites get busy again, before the Independence party is over.

1. Colonial treasures

We've already had a few 200th birthdays in South America in recent years, but this one's a biggie. Lima was the seat of Spanish Imperial power and nearby Callao was the most important port for shipping bullion to Europe. José de San Martín, having played a leading role in the liberation of Argentina and Chile, arrived in Peru in August 1820. His troops besieged Lima, while the disgraced former Royal Navy commander Lord Cochrane attacked Callao. Independence was officially proclaimed on July 28, 1821, though skirmishes would continue for five more years. Lima is full of colonial palaces as well as Republican-era edifices. The 16th-century Casa de Aliaga (Aliaga Mansion), located opposite the Government Palace, was the home of conquistador Francisco Pizarro's exchequer. A member of the Aliaga family, which still resides here, shows guests around the lavishly decorated salons, patios and hallways, resplendent with oil paintings, antique furnishings, beautiful woodwork and hand-painted tilework.

How to do it: Last Frontiers (0129 665 3000; lastfrontiers.com) has a 10-day Peru itinerary with a historical flavour, including the Casa de Aliaga and Larco and Pedro de Osma museums in Lima, a hacienda in the Sacred Valley and a full day visiting Machu Picchu, from, £3,265 per person, including international flights.



Peru is home to many ancient sites, such as El Brujo (pictured) | CREDIT: Getty

2. Ancient ruins

Peruvian history goes back 5,000 years, with many ancient monuments to its successive civilisations. One pre-Inca cultural epicentre is the area around Trujillo on the coast. The Huaca del Sol and Huaca de la Luna, built between 200 AD and 850 AD, are believed to form the religious and ceremonial centre of the Moche culture; remarkably well preserved, they are filled with beautiful ceramics, precious metals and colourful friezes. The ancient Chimor citadel of Chan Chan and the El Brujo complex are other major archaeological sites a short road trip away.

How to do it: Pura Aventura (0127 367 6712; pura-aventura.com) offers a 13-night "Pacific & Andes" trip, combining Trujillo with Lima, Cusco, the Sacred Valley and Machu Picchu, from £4,865 per person, including accommodation, some meals, private guided excursions, internal flights and transfers. Return international flights are extra, and will cost from £700 per person.

3. South America's finest food

Whether you choose to blow a wad on one of Lima's award-winning fine-dining restaurants (Maido, Astrid y Gastón, Central, Isolina and Rafael are superb) or find yourself being catered to on a homestay, your tastebuds will be tingled by wonderful fish and shellfish ceviches, more-ish causas (potato layer cakes), hearty soups, offal stews, fabulous tropical fruits and indigenous takes on Chinese cuisine. While the Pacific is the obvious source of produce – you can smell the sea on the terraces of the homey eateries around Callao – the Peruvian kitchen is also stocked from the Amazon and Andes, from deserts as well as jungles, while the Altiplano (high plain) is a vital source of potatoes and tubers.

How to do it: Journey Latin America (020 3553 9647; journeylatinamerica.co.uk) offers a 12-day “Taste of Peru” culinary holiday taking in Lima, Nazca, Ica, Paracas, the Sacred Valley, Machu Picchu and Cusco, starting from £4,370 per person, including flights, accommodation and all excursions.

4. A dashing new hotel in an unsung old city

The new Relais & Châteaux Cirqa hotel occupies a restored 16th-century former monastery in the unsung second city of Arequipa – which is roughly the same age. Eleven stylish suites are decorated with antique furniture, and outside is a tranquil terrace, a patio with heated plunge pool and therapy spa room, plus an organic rooftop garden which services a rural style picantería in the heart of the city, serving excellent homemade cuisine. Arequipa is known as the “White City”: many of its oldest buildings, in the Unesco-listed historical centre, were built from white and pink volcanic rock. Highlights include a majestic cathedral, an Inca mummy, delicious food and the stunning backdrop of three volcanoes – including El Misti, which is almost 20,000 feet high.

How to do it: Abercrombie & Kent (0124 254 7760; abercrombiekent.co.uk) offers a 12-night “Explore Peru” itinerary including Arequipa and a stay at the new Cirqa hotel, for £5,485 per person, including flights, transfers and accommodation.



Sourcing food from the Pacific, the Amazon, the desert and the mountains, Peruvian cuisine is uniquely diverse

5. Get tactile with textiles

Peru has a rich tapestry of 55 indigenous groups speaking 47 languages; people self-defining as indigenous or mestizo/cholo (mixed race) constitute as much as 80 per cent of the population. A fascinating way for travellers to connect with non-Hispanic traditions is via arts and crafts. A dedicated tour includes Lima's Amano Museum of Pre-Columbian Textiles, meeting rural weavers and visiting a textile artist's private atelier.

How to do it: Aracari (020 7097 1750; aracari.com) has a six-night “Textile Tour” in Lima and the Sacred Valley from £1,863 including guides, accommodation and

Zana and the Sacred Valley, from £2,000, including guides, accommodation and transfers; flights not included.

6. Hiking Huayhuash

If you've seen the film *Touching the Void* (2003), you'll know how breathtaking the snow-capped peaks of the Huayhuash range are; one famously photogenic section, not far from the ridge where the British climbers Joe Simpson and Simon Yates fell through a deep cornice, affords a dazzling view of turquoise lakes framed by glaciers and rock. There are multi-day hikes out of Huaraz (a good place to acclimatise), with or without porters. The going is tough, with steep climbs and thin air on the passes.

How to do it: Andean Trails (0131 467 7086; andeantrails.co.uk) offers a 16-day trip, including the Huayhuash circuit, from £1,888 per person, including all in-country transport, airport transfers, accommodation, tour guide, cook, three meals daily and park entrance fees. Flights extra.

7. Make Explora your base camp

A drawback of many Machu Picchu-focused trips is how they speed visitors through the Sacred Valley, often by train, the whole tour becoming a box-ticking exercise. The Explora Sacred Valley is a full-service lodge, with high-end hotel cuisine and guest rooms, offering guests a daily menu of more than 40 activities – hikes, easy walks, bike rides, drives and horserides – designed to open up the landscapes, villages and archaeological sites.

How to do it: Audley (0199 368 3873; audleytravel.com) has a five-night stay at Explora from £3,442 per person, including accommodation, meals, drinks, excursions, park fees and return transfers to Cusco. Flights extra. You can also book directly with the lodge; a three-night package is £2,442 per person; see explora.com

8. A luxurious new boat to cruise on the Amazon

Launched on April 3 2021, the Aqua Nera sails out of Iquitos into the northern Amazon region. The interior design makes nods to the rubber-boom era and the cultures of Peru, Portugal and Spain, with expansive windows looking out to the rainforest. Naturalists lead small group excursions and the kitchen serves refined cuisine using Amazonian produce, prepared by one of Peru's finest chefs.

How to do it: Aqua Expeditions (0065 6270 4002; aquaexpeditions.com) has seven-night cruises, starting from £7,212 per person. Flights extra.



The Aqua Nera plies the northern reaches of the Amazon

9. Sacred Valley in-depth

If you really want to educate yourself about Peru's pre-Columbian and post-conquest history, it pays to have a seriously qualified guide to take you through the Sacred Valley to see the likes of the Maras salt mines, Moray circular agricultural terraces and Inca citadel of Ollantaytambo. Take time to explore Lima too; the Huaca Pucllana is an extraordinary adobe and clay pyramid in the heart of residential Miraflores.

How to do it: Martin Randall (020 8742 3355; martinrandall.com) offers a 13-night expert-led group tour (10-22 participants) of ancient sites in Lima, Trujillo and the Sacred Valley, from £5,740 per person, including local flights, accommodation, most meals, lecturer and tour leader; international flights not included. Next tour on September 7-20, 2022.

10. Ride South America's highest railways

Peru is one of the few countries in South America where long-distance railways have survived. These range from the low-budget Ferrocarril Central Andino, which links the port of Callao and Lima with Huancayo and Cerro de Pasco in the Andes (a 12- to 14-hour odyssey for committed rail fans) to luxury services up and down the Sacred Valley and across the Andean high plain.

How to do it: Latin Routes (020 8546 6222; latinroutes.co.uk) offers a 10-day "Luxury Highlights of Peru" holiday, including journeys on the Belmond Andean Explorer and the Hiram Bingham train to Machu Picchu, from £4,899 per person, including accommodation, tours, selected meals and domestic flights.

II. The adventurous Amazon

The Río Tambopata – a tributary of the mighty Madre de Dios, which flows to the Amazon – is the gateway into the wildlife-rich forests of the Bahuaje-Sonene National Park. Many people come here to lounge in a lodge, but a rafting trip combined with camping is more exciting. Jaguar sightings are not impossible and capybara, tapir, peccary, giant otters and caiman are common, as are hundreds of birds and butterflies. Rapids range from grades II to IV so the trip's ideal for those who have already done some rafting. The expedition ends with a night at the Tambopata Research Centre, beside one of the world's largest macaw licks.

How to do it: KE Adventure (0176 877 3966; keadventure.com) has a 14-day group trip (five-12 passengers) from £4,995, including flights. Next tour on July 2-16, 2022.



The Belmond Andean Explorer is a luxurious way to explore the Sacred Valley | CREDIT: Matt Crossick/Belmond

12. Vinicunca Rainbow Mountain

A great add-on to any Peru holiday is the Rainbow Mountain. Ice-melt mixed with assorted minerals has given this photogenic mountain surreal-looking layers of red

(mainly iron oxide), purples (goethite, limonite), yellow (iron sulphide) and green (chlorite). It's reached via a three-hour road trip from Cusco, followed by a six-hour trek, and is at its photogenic best in the morning and late afternoon.

How to do it: GAdventures (0845 528 0471; gadventures.com) offers a seven-day adventure-accented trip starting and finishing in Cusco, including mountain biking, hiking, ziplining and the Rainbow Mountain, from £729 per person. Flights extra.

13. The other Lost City of the Incas

For those after a serious hike, Choquequirao is a remote Inca citadel in the Salkantay mountain range close to Cusco. The complex was built during the reign of Emperor Pachacuti Inca Yupangui, and not properly excavated or opened to visitors until recently. Choquequirao is reachable via a four-day trek but if you have time, it's best to do a longer, slower hike and enjoy the beautiful scenery and smaller sites located along the path.

How to do it: Exodus (020 3131 2785; exodus.co.uk) has a 15-day trip, combining five nights in hotels with seven nights camping, from £2,949 per person, including all breakfasts, seven lunches and dinners, tour leader and flights.

14. Tranquillity on Titicaca

Lake Titicaca shimmers at 12,507ft above sea level and spans 2,232 square miles (making it larger than Cyprus). The vast dome of cloudless sky, the pellucid, deep-blue water and the snow-capped mountains of the Cordillera Real that frame the whole make it an affectingly spiritual place. Lots of tours include the lake, which usually means a trip to the touristy reed-islands, but there's nothing like bedding down for a few days and just sitting, or standing, and staring.

How to do it: Titilaka (0051 1700 5111; titilaka.pe) is a stunningly designed resort on the lip of the lake, offering amazing food, lots of excursions and plenty of spaces for coffee, stargazing or yoga. Doubles from £805 per night.

15. Kuélap, Gocta Falls and hidden Amazon

At the edge of Peru's central Amazon region, Kuélap, built in the 6th century by the Chachapoyas, is a walled settlement atop high peaks. It was home to more than 5,000 people in its heyday and its architecture and location are at least as jaw-dropping as Machu Picchu's. You can walk it or split the visit between boot leather and a cable-car. The journey to the site, from Chiclayo or Cajamarca, is an adventure in itself, with stops at the Gocta Cataracts – a towering waterfall only “discovered” by outsiders in 2002 – and the Leymebamba Mummy Museum.

How to do it: Steppes Travel (0128 588 0980; steppestravel.com) has a 15-day guided trip to northern Peru that incorporates Kuélap, a trek to Gocta Falls and time spent discovering the snow-capped peaks of the Cordillera Blanca. From £5,650 per person, including flights, accommodation, guides and some meals.





There are roughly 120 floating islands fashioned out of reeds on Lake Titicaca | CREDIT: Getty

16. Birds of the Andes

You don't have to be a full-on twitcher to appreciate the fluttering things that enliven Peru's many biomes. More than 1,800 bird species have been logged here, including the spectacular Andean cock-of-the-rock, boisterous hoatzin and rare long-whiskered owl, as well as around a hundred species of hummingbird. An expert-led tour of the Western Andes and Ballestas Islands takes in mountains, forests, high-altitude peat bogs called bofedales; likely sightings include the endemic white cotinga, Humboldt penguin and Inca tern.

How to do it: Naturetrek (0196 273 3051; naturetrek.co.uk) has a 10-day "Surf and Turf" birding tour, from £2,995, including flights and most meals. Next tour on May 12-21, 2022.

17. Peru's Northern Beaches

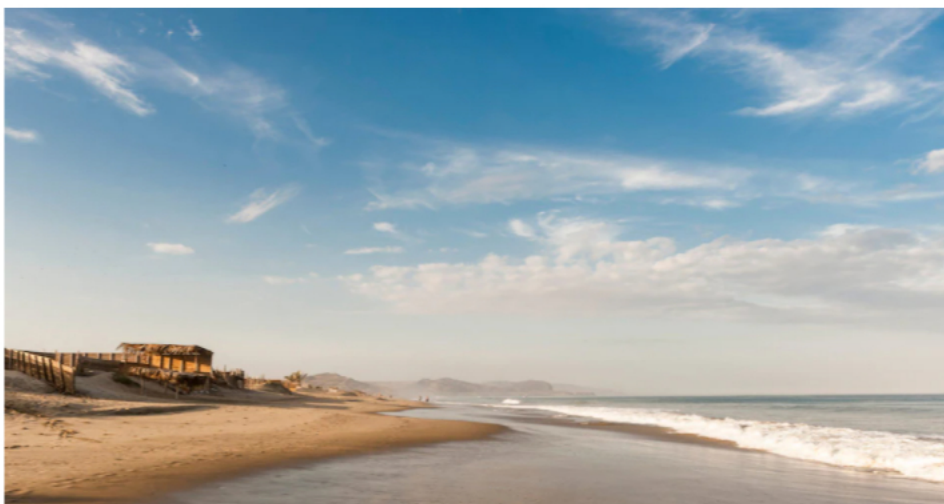
Archaeology needn't mean arduous. Fly north to see the ancient sites of Trujillo and Chiclayo, including the mysterious pyramids at Túcume and the tomb of the Lord of Sipán at Huaca Rajada; this magnificent tomb, only discovered in 1987, contained a king and his entourage buried with gold artifacts and utensils for the afterlife, reminiscent of an Egyptian Pharaoh. After four days ruin-roaming, fly up to Talara to spend three days relaxing on the beach at Máncora in the boutique hotel of Kichic – with yoga classes every day and delicious cuisine.

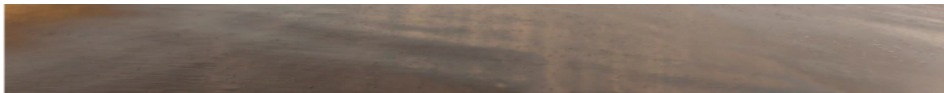
How to do it: Select Latin America (020 7407 1478; selectlatinamerica.co.uk) has an eight-day tour to the north, from £2,397 per person, including domestic flights, accommodation, private guided tours and half board. International flights extra.

18. Colca Canyon

If you get tired of going up-up-up in Peru, you can always head down. Nearly 11,000ft deep and 62 miles long, the Colca Canyon was formed by a river, grinding down ancient volcanic deposits. Beyond the steep-sided main fault are arid steppes and fertile grassland terraced by farmers to grow superfoods like quinoa and amaranth. A tour takes in 2,000-year-old villages, the pre-Incan Uyo Uyo ruins, and viewpoints where you can see condors drifting on the thermals.

How to do it: Reef and Rainforest (0180 386 6965; reefandrainforest.co.uk) has a 12-day tour that combines the Colca Canyon with the classic Inca Trail hike, Lake Titicaca and a flying visit to Tambopata, from £3,621 per person, including some meals and transfers. Flights extra.





Combine sightseeing with a day of relaxation on Máncores beach | CREDIT: Getty

19. Cycling – at your own pace

Slow travel and road cycling are both on trend. While you might think the Andes make for lung-busting pedalling, one savvy local operator is offering tours around the Sacred Valley using full suspension e-bikes. The trips are perfect for fit families or cycling groups, combining rides to quiet corners of the region well away from the coach parties, with camping, cooking classes, kayak excursions and rafting and a hike to the off-radar Waqrapukara Inca ruins.

How to do it: Amazonas Explorer (0051 9541 65014; amazonas-explorer.com) has an eight-day “Active Machu Picchu Adventure” holiday to the famous citadel, from £1,705 per person, including transfers, some meals, bikes and guides. Flights extra. Book directly or via Cazenove+Loyd (cazloyd.com) in the UK.

20. Tune in to Afro-Peruvian music

So, you’ve got the British Museum show booked. You’ve got a selection of tantalising tours. And perhaps you’ve sourced a bottle of fiery pisco. To really get you in the mood, have a listen to some Afro-Peruvian tunes. The highly distinctive roots music can be traced back to black slaves brought to work in mines and as domestic servants along the Pacific coast from the 16th century. It later drew on Andean and Spanish traditions, as well as homegrown nueva canción music. If you spend any time in Lima, there’s a chance of seeing a live show at a peña (folk club) like Don Porfirio in Barranco. In the meantime, have a listen to Palabras Urgentes, the new album from Grammy-winning Susana Baca, just released by Peter Gabriel’s Real World label.

For more information, visit peru.travel and lata.travel