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Hotel Titilaka, Puno. Surrounded by three indigenous communities – Ayamara, Quechuas, Uros

These ethnic communities are woven deep into the cultural fabric of the hotel. In conversation with CEO Andean Experience, Ignacio Masias

Hotel Titilaka, Puno: Lake Titicaca

Tucked up on the tip of a private peninsula, Hotel Titilaka, Puno a luxury eco-lodge, is perched at about four thousand meters above sea level. It rests on the shores of Lake Titicaca. On the border of Peru and Bolivia, Lake Titicaca is the cradle of Incan civilization. The lake was believed by the Inca to be the sacred origin of the universe, the birthplace of the fabled empire. It is, in fact, one of less than twenty ancient lakes on earth, and is thought to be three million years old. The highest navigable lake in the world – glistening amidst the Andean mountains – is home to some of Peru's farthest-flung communities.

Lake Titicaca – located on the desolate Altiplano plateau – serves as a source of water and food for the surrounding communities. It creates a microclimate that allows the cultivation of potatoes and grains (barley, corn, and quinoa) possible at a high altitude. Further facilitating husbandry of alpacas, llamas, sheep, and cows in the area. The first settlements around Lake Titicaca date back to 1,500 B.C.: the Aymara. In the 15th century A.D., the Incan empire stretched until Lake Titicaca. During the Incan period, the indigenous people called the Uros would flee from violent conflicts with the Incas onto the swimming islands they built from Totora reeds. The Uros to this day lives on their islands.

There have been shreds of evidence of continuous human settlements around the lake. Remnants of the ancient monuments, and the specific land-use management depicts cultural manifestations. This indicates a constant relation between man and nature since ancient days. The ambiance narrates the tales of the birth and development of the Andean pre-Hispanic societies. The landscape surrounding the lake is fringed by yellow grass reeds used to construct the traditional boats and homes floating upon it.

Lampoon review: Titilaka, Puno luxury eco-lodge

Located next door to the hamlet from which it takes its name, Titilaka, Puno offers a glimpse into the way of life and traditions of the lake dwellers. Surrounded by three indigenous communities – Ayamara, Quechuas, Uros – Titilaka offers a cultural experience. «The vision was to capture the beauty of the lake, the landscape, but also narrate the story and history of the region that has existed here since pre-Inca times. The hotel is designed as a hub through which you could explore these three ethnicities».



HOTEL TITILAKA, PUNO THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE HOTEL WAS ORCHESTRATED BY JORDI PIUG, IN COLLABORATION WITH INTERIOR DESIGNER, SANDRA MASIAS

The streak of ethical tourism in the family

Titilaka, Puno is the brainchild of Ignacio Masias, founder and CEO Andean Experience. His stepfather, Jose 'Joey' Koehlin von Stein, founded Inkatererra in 1975, an eco-tourism Peruvian hotel company. Inkatererra aimed at conserving Peru's natural environment and 'cultural and archaeological resources'. The group is behind the carbon-neutral properties La Casona Inkatererra, situated in Cusco, and the Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel, nestled in the cloud forest in the heart of Machu Picchu's Historic Sanctuary. After pursuing MBA from Wharton University, Masias returned home to join his family venture. He worked at Inkatererra for seven years as the commercial manager before he launched his company, Andean Experience in 2007.

Masias was looking for world-class destinations in Peru that had fewer or no quality hospitality options. «It took us about a couple of years to find the location. I knew I wanted to do something in the highlands of one of the highest lakes in the world. We found an existing building which was never completed. It was an attempt at a hotel by three previous owners which never really took off. We acquired the property, restructured and upcycled it into a hotel».

Architecture and design of Hotel Titilaka, Puno

Secluded on a private peninsula, the hotel appears to be a ship surrounded by water on all three sides. Masias tells us, «the architecture of the lodge is not the one that we love but what we found. If this building did not exist we would have made the lodge in a scattered village type format». That being said, the team made several amends for its metamorphosis into a low-impact structure. This Masias explains, was achieved by «working with artisans and designers from Lima to create a contemporary modern hub. We tried to make it fit with the environment as much as possible by cleaning it up».

The architecture of the hotel was orchestrated by Jordi Piug, in collaboration with interior designer, Sandra Masias. Titilaka, Puno's contemporary interiors are punctuated with local textiles, craft products, bespoke Andean artwork, and recycled furniture. Floor-to-ceiling windows provide uninterrupted views of the lake while incorporating the principles of ecological architecture. «The team also played with the landscaping around the property to make it feel like you're in the middle of a quinoa plantation, and the lake», adds Masias.

The hotel's eighteen lake-facing rooms, distributed on three levels, are connected by a central hallway. All of them look out onto the mystical Incan lake and the snowcapped peaks. «We wanted to make sure that every room gets the lake view. Due to its location, the left side rooms offer sunrise views, and the ones on the right the sunset. So we labeled the rooms dusk and dawn enabling the clients to choose their experience». Rooms come equipped with ultra-modern facilities: heated floors, iPods, and portable oxygen tanks. Altitude sickness is a problem here so the rooms come installed with extra oxygen for emergencies.

This eco-lodge is also home to two private beaches. Featured on-site is a boathouse – a structure made of steel used to keep all their boating equipment. Constructed as an energy-efficient hotel it is a part of the Peruvian hydroelectric grid. The use of plastics is eliminated throughout the hotel.



TITILAKA'S BUSINESS MODEL FOCUSES ON CONSERVING ANDEAN TRADITIONS

Preserving the indigenous communities

Titilaka, Puno is positioned right in the middle of three ethnic groups – the Quechuas (north part of the property), the Ayamaras (southern part), and the Uros – the people who live in the floating islands in the lake. The essence of these ethnic communities is woven deep into the cultural fabric of the hotel.

Titilaka's business model focuses on conserving Andean traditions. The lodge, in fact, is dedicated to the preservation of ethnic groups. Committed to forging a connection with the communities, while hoping to provide them with financial stability. The majority of the hotel's staff has been hired from local villages which have consequently boosted their economic development. «Clara Luz, the lodge's Lead Housekeeper, she has been a part of the Titilaka family for fourteen years», adds Masias.

Patrons are invited to engage with the skilled weavers, and take a glimpse into their heritage and ancestral techniques: «Such experiences are at the core of the hotel's offering». Guests receive a welcome gift of small ceramic pots made and used by the locals for cooking. The slippers present in the room are made of alpaca wool.

Speaking of the protection of indigenous people's rights, Titilaka, Puno works with a non-profit organization that supports the lake-side communities through generating donations on behalf of every guest. «During the pandemic, we did an online fundraiser with our old clients to raise money. This allowed us to buy 500 meal kits for the families around our area».

Activities and excursions: the offerings of Hotel Titilaka, Puno

A menu of excursions and activities comes with every booking. Daytime activities range from exploring Inca and pre-Inca ruins, visiting the floating reed islands of the Uros people, leisurely hiking or biking through Andean scenery. Historical sites abound, Sillustani's Ancient Chullpas – pre-Hispanic funeral grounds, Chucuito peninsula, Colonial churches of Juli, Pomata, and Lampa, bird watching from the hilltops of Perka and Inkanatavi. The Uros Floating Islands and Taquile Island visit is one of the most requested excursions. Built on totora reed, the Uros islands are home to the Uros-Titino people, expert raftsmen, and textile weavers from whom guests learn the ancestral techniques used to keep these islands afloat. «In Taquile, guests grow familiar with the Quechua imaginary in the textile tradition recently included in UNESCO's Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity», iterates Masias.

Culinary offering at Hotel Titilaka, Puno

Helmed by veteran chef Maria Fè Garcia, the restaurant menu beguiles customers with a culinary offering. A close friend of Masias, Garcia graduated from Le Cordon Bleu in Lima and specializes in Peruvian food. The lodge offers a handpicked lake-to-table menu, curated in collaboration with the local fisherman. Showcasing the essence of the largest freshwater lake in South America, chef Garcia's menu is inspired by the waterbody that surrounds the lodge. As for the sourcing of other ingredients, the emphasis is on local.

The restaurant's signature dishes are an attempt to revive the ancient cooking techniques of the Incas. «One of them is the pachamanca trout. Pachamanca is a traditional cooking method where the food is buried, with hot stones, under the ground». The condiments borrow inspiration from the Aymara community. A dip for the potatoes is made using local edible clay, spiked with spices and oil. Not just intriguing, this artisanal recipe also helps fix gut health issues.

The initial thought was to serve light food to help clients adjust to the altitude change. «However, owing to the high expectations and international with strong local flavors and ingredients», explains Masias. Menu highlights abound: Ceviche de Trucha. Canilla de Cordero con Ensalada y Espinaca. Black quinoa tabbouleh. Prickly pear juice. Quigotto spiced with hot yellow chili called Aji.

The hotel suspended its operations for eight months after the pandemic. They re-opened in October 2020, but at a small scale, as the locals were afraid of bringing foreigners into the landscape. «After the first round of vaccination, we opened doors to the local Peruvian travelers and now we are slowly letting in international travelers. We are currently at 20% occupancy of what it used to be. But we are moving in the right direction and seeing the recovery paths in the months ahead», explains Masias. As for the future, Masias and his team are working towards opening a sister property in a nearby town. Details of which are yet to be announced.

CHETNA CHOPRA

The writer does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organization that would benefit from this article.

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