

PERU - BEYOND MACHU PICCHU

Don't get me wrong. That first view of Machu Picchu is spectacular! Of course it's why most people go to Peru in the first place. It's such a mystical site, with an alluring history. It's a place you'll never forget. But there's more to see in Peru and maybe you'll find another place that sings to you even more. You won't know until you get there.

I've learned over the years that as travelers, we all have a special spot and sometimes it's unexpected. For me I prefer Egypt's pyramid of Sakkara to the Great Pyramid, India's Jaipur palaces to the Taj Mahal and Teton National Park to Yellowstone. You get my point. In Peru I actually prefer the lovely Sacred Valley along the Urubamba River to Machu Picchu, as impressive as it is.

As I've written before, I also love the Peruvian Rainforest in Puerto Maldonado. Tucked away between two rivers in the Amazon Basin, it's brimming with abundant flora and fauna. What I like most is the gentleness of the Rainforest, combined with the adventure. But that's me and luckily I'll return there in November.

I recognize though, that some people are drawn to entirely different spots in Peru. For some it's the Amazon River in Iquitos. For others it might be Lake Titicaca, high in the Andes. For others still, it might be the spellbinding Nazca Lines. I've been to them all and found each fascinating.

Due to the recent earthquake, driving to the Nazca Lines might be tough today (flying is okay). The drive is interesting though, especially when you arrive in Ica (hard hit). Ica is home to Dr. Cabrera's small, but amazing museum. It houses a huge collection of carved stones, showing ancient images of the earth. His collection is controversial, but he maintains it's been carbon dated to 13 million years ago. When I first saw it, I literally gasped. I was in awe of what I saw and felt, sensing the stones were beyond this world.

As you leave Ica, prepare for another "out of this world" experience - seeing the Nazca Lines. They must be seen from a plane, making some people speculate only extra-terrestrials could have created them. Small stones in the desert form more than 100 immense images like a hummingbird, monkey, lizard, spider, flower and even a spaceman. To my knowledge, no one knows the true history of the lines. So once you've been there, maybe Ica or Nazca will become your favorite place.

Of course you might also be drawn to Lake Titicaca. I know many people feel their time there is truly "out of this world". At 12,530 feet, the turquoise lake is set within a quasi-lunar landscape anyway. When I was there, we started our tour at the sacred burial site of Sillustani and moved on to see the bird life of Lake Umayo. The next day we traveled to the amazing temple of Aramu Muru and ended our day on the floating islands of Uros. Made from reeds by the native people, you literally bounce along with each step you take on the islands. Some people also venture out to Taquile Island for a somewhat primitive overnight with local families or the Islands of the Sun and Moon. So for you, Lake Titicaca might just be your very special place.

Of course it could also be the Amazon River near Iquitos. I've been there twice and enjoyed it both times. Once you're past bustling Iquitos, you'll board a thatched boat and head downstream to your jungle lodge. Instead you might be lucky enough to board one of the new luxury riverboats for a week (try International Expeditions). When I went years ago, we only had the lodges to choose from though.

It was certainly an adventure staying in huts with no electricity and only kerosene lamps for light. We quickly learned to take late afternoon showers, after the sun had warmed up the rooftop supply of water. Then we'd walk to dinner along lantern lit boardwalks, set high above the river's annual flood line. Each day we'd hike through the jungle, visiting native villages, seeing all sorts of plants and animals (including pink dolphins) and reveling in some of the most stunning sunsets ever.

A few years ago, a friend went on one of my group tours to Peru. At home she grows magnificent orchids and so I thought she'd love the Amazon. She wasn't drawn to it at first and I practically had to twist her arm to go. As we were flying home I asked what was her favorite part of our trip? She sheepishly smiled, laughed and said, "the Amazon". That's the way it goes. You never know what your favorite spot might be until you get there, especially in the magical land of Peru.

Columnist's Note: Read my other articles on Peru and the Rainforest at www.hometownnewsol.com