

# 17 days in Peru

with 10 intrepid Internet strangers



BY KIRSTEN KOZA



Searching the Internet for travel companions is riskier than a blind date. I ignored my wise-trepidation and posted on Mountain Equipment Co-op's website for "trip partners," confident nobody would sign up for 17 days of mountain biking in Peru. Shockingly, nine women from across Canada quickly booked seats near mine on a Latin American airline that none had heard of before.

top: Ten women, strangers from across Canada who signed up for the trip on the Internet, pose for a photo before their first ride with their Peruvian mountain bike guide whom they found on the Internet as well. | centre: At an altitude of 2,430 metres, the citadel at Machu Picchu covers about 10 hectares. | left: Huambo villagers dance outside the bullring. Peruvians seem to celebrate something daily in villages and towns across the country. *Kirsten Koza*



Although we'd been organizing our trip on Facebook for months, we met for the first time at Pearson International Airport in Toronto. We were bringing our own bicycles and obviously didn't need 10 bike pumps. Some women brought tools for bike repair. I agreed to contribute items for human repair: malaria meds, antibiotics for typhoid, Diamox for altitude sickness, an Epipen, a suture kit and tissue glue. I hoped if I fell apart I could just glue myself back together. While stowing surgical scissors inside my kit, I realized someone I'd never met before—perhaps the architect, the biologist, the police constable, or maybe the tuba player—might actually have to sew up a trip partner, after a tumble in the Andes. It would be great if we liked each other.

### **Towering sand dunes**

I unwittingly became an unpaid tour leader when I organized a trip and invited strangers. The stress began immediately, pre-departure. At my recommendation, nobody was renting a mountain bike in Peru. Check-in, unexpectedly, slapped standby tags on \$20,000 worth of bicycles belonging to my trip partners. Seeing all our bike cases emerge on the conveyor belt in Lima resulted in massive relief—surpassed minutes later when our guide greeted me with kisses. I had found him on the Internet, too.



A 64 in the morning.

A '64 Merlot in the evening. Good round.

Seize the Day

I happily handed the reins of responsibility over to the guide from Peru Adventure Tours. However, guilt lingered when the executive assistant discovered her bicycle had incurred damage. Her hydraulic brake fluid was leaking. Then the logistics manager's gears malfunctioned on our first ride. She missed the sunset dream of cycling over the compressed sand, along the ocean cliffs, of Paracas National Reserve.

Peru Adventure Tours proved to be seasoned professionals as they skillfully distracted us with sandboarding activity while their mechanic healed our bicycles. We screamed across monstrous, white mountains of sand in our super-charged dune buggies and bonded with laughter when sandboarding crashes proved snow tastes better than sand. Peru is home to the tallest sand dune in the world; Nazca's Cerro Blanco is a staggering 2,070 metres.

### Testing the partnership

The Colca Canyon is twice as deep as the Grand Canyon. Our descent would take hours on a rock-strewn, jarring track. A reprieve from biking occurred as pins and needles set into our hands and feet.



*Peru is home to the tallest sand dune in the world.*

opposite page: There are advantages and disadvantages to travelling with one's own bicycle. Many airlines allow bicycles as part of your free checked baggage allowance. But baggage handlers have a tendency to mishandle luggage. It's best to pack a bicycle in a proper bike-case to minimize damage. *Karen Fockler* | above: Peru boasts the largest sand dunes in the world. *Kirsten Koza*



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The colourful villagers of Huambo surrounded our group. Strong hands pulled us from our bikes and past a matador, socializing outside a stadium. Inside the bullring, the brass band's loud, repetitive melody whipped the crowd into excitement. The large wooden doors closed. Still in cycling helmets and shoes, we danced in the choking dust, centre ring. Smiling men in ten-gallon hats shared their bottle of *chichi*—an intoxicating liquid traditionally made of fermented saliva and corn—with the executive assistant and marketing rep. Then the unthinkable happened. Ten bulls were released into the ring with us—no matador. The crowd threw rice at the bulls. The sexually excited bulls didn't notice us. They only had eyes for each other.

High on the festivities, not *chicha*, we resumed our descent. I rounded a switchback. The architect was on the ground, her bike near the canyon edge,

her helmet in pieces. She clutched her arm and our guide ushered her into the supporting 4x4. A half-hour later, the day turned into night. I came around another bend. The social worker was limping towards me. "I think I've broken my ankle."

Our guide was still somewhere in the canyon with the others. I offered support and inexpert translation services for my injured trip partners in the tiny canyon hospital. I translated the admissions sign: \$1.50 for sutures, \$3 for unspecified extractions and \$30 for an autopsy. I told them not to die—it was too expensive. The teacher produced her wallet to pay for their examinations and injections. The cigar-smoking doctor said they could get x-rays in the city of Puno, beside Lake Titicaca, a three-day journey away.

The support and codeine I offered the architect and social worker became an unspoken reciprocal agreement

when we arrived in Puno. Still suffering themselves, they brought me stomach medication and bottled water. For two days, the police constable and I clutched our respective toilet bowls. I was devastated to be missing Lake Titicaca's reed islands. I lay in bed shivering as the teacher showed me her photos of reed boats.

### Lifetime dream

Machu Picchu was never *The Lost City of the Incas*—romantically titled by Hiram Bingham. The locals knew it existed. Bingham paid a farmer just pennies to lead him there in 1911. Today, Machu Picchu is literally being crushed under the weight of tourism. At 5:30 a.m., a never-ending procession of tour buses departs the town of Aguas Calientes below the ruins. Each day, 2,000 tourists pant and push their way through the archaeological complex. My friends were not panting. We had acclimatized having

"Machu Picchu was the best day of my life."

come down in elevation to Machu Picchu's 2,430 metres, after biking at 4,570 metres.

The tuba player declared Machu Picchu was at the top of her list of "things to do before she died." Her words worried me as I sprinted with a full bladder, over the impressively large ruins, trying to get a photograph without hundreds of tourists blocking the view. The only toilets at the site are outside the turnstiles. If you leave to use the facilities, you must queue at the entrance gates all over again.

"Machu Picchu was the best day of my life," the tuba player confessed later. Surprisingly, everyone thanked me for organizing the Peru trip.

I must return to Peru because I didn't sample the popular dish, roast guinea pig. Would I advertise to Internet strangers again? Absolutely—not for practical reasons such as cost-sharing but purely for the fun. ■

**opposite page:** Shop for colourful woven goods at Condor Cross (3,600 metres), Colca Canyon. | **right:** At the height of the tourist season, 2,500 visitors are allowed into Machu Picchu per day. UNESCO says that the archaeological site cannot handle 500 visitors per day without damage. Scientists have found the site to be slipping down the mountain at a rate of about one centimetre per month. *Kirsten Koza*

## travelplanner

TACA offers daytime flights from Toronto to Lima. Sporting equipment flies free of charge as part of your 45 to 68 kilograms of checked-baggage allowance. Visit [taca.com](http://taca.com) or call 1-800-722-8222.

Peru Adventure Tours features a variety of private excursions: cycling, walking, climbing, horseback riding, leisurely jungle tours, 4x4 tours, the Inca Trail and more. Visit [peruadventuretours.com](http://peruadventuretours.com).

Leap Local is funded by Cambridge University. They promote the support of local economies when travelling. Their website ([leaplocal.org](http://leaplocal.org)) gives detailed recommendations and contact information for more than 100 Peruvian guides.

Interested in finding travel companions or joining someone else's expedition? Go to Mountain Equipment Co-op's website ([mec.ca](http://mec.ca)) to view the Trip Partners listings or to add your own. All listings are free of charge and the content is subject to approval by MEC.

Kirsten Koza is the author of *Lost in Moscow*.

