

Welcome to the first edition of the Leap Local Newsletter



Dear Leapers,

For those of you who don't know, the Leap team is a bunch of people who regularly volunteer some of their time to work on Leap Local. Leap Local is a scheme which aims to use the internet to empower local communities and alleviate poverty by giving them access to tourism (see our website for more details). The team contributes technical, strategic, marketing, and international development expertise.

We are about to introduce new search functions, a map function, better navigation around the site, ways to tell your friends about good travel guides and services, and a livelier site overall. This was in response to research we have conducted over the last few months due to a grant we were awarded by the East of England Development Agency (EEDA). Thanks to all of you who contributed your thoughts and ideas.



Another crucial part of the research was to make sure local guides and services were benefiting from Leap Local. Louise (co-founder of Leap) helped organise this research in Peru and discusses some of the results in this newsletter. Our findings confirmed that local guides and services find it difficult to compete with tour operators and western guides owing to difficulties in self-promotion. Having a web presence is not something many local guides and services have, though they recognise the value of the internet to connect with western tourists. The local guides and services were thankful for the opportunities Leap Local can offer at no cost to them.

Once we have introduced some of these changes to Leap described above, we are keen to expand our reach both geographically and in the traveller community. We will be posting news on these activities on the website. In the meantime all recommendations you can give of local guides and services, and to friends about what we are doing, helps encourage responsible tourism that benefits local communities. This will also help us identify key individuals for an honorary award we will introduce for our expert travellers.

Happy travelling!

From Liles
Co-founder of Leap Local



On the ground in Peru...

Our first programme is already running in Peru. With Peru becoming increasingly popular with travellers, and a poverty rate of 49%, it is a natural choice for our pilot scheme. Co-founder of Leap, Louise lives in Ollantaytambo and oversees all activities at ground level.

As part of our ongoing market research and contact with local people, Leap recently conducted a survey of a selection of the Peruvian locals listed on the website, in order to understand their needs and develop Leap further.

We took a laptop round to all our locals so that we could demonstrate the website - their faces lit up when they saw their photo and that they really had their own web page. We spoke to local guides, hostel owners, people offering food and families who offer homestay (rooms in their house for visiting travellers to stay over). All those questioned mentioned the primary potential benefit of Leap Local as increased publicity and the resulting contact with tourists or financial benefits.



One Local, Lorenzo Yupanki of the mountainous campesino community of Patakancha, who offers homestay and has just three years of primary education, said that the economic benefits could allow him to put his children through school. His cousin, Marcelino Yupanki, also of Patakancha and offering homestay, recognised the importance of the internet as publicity despite having no internet skills himself. You can read more about this project in the article about Patakancha in the next newsletter.

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When asked what they would do if they were unable to make a booking, it was reassuring to see that almost all the locals said they would make alternative arrangements so that another local could receive the traveller. In terms of how they preferred travellers to contact them, most guides preferred email contact and those providing accommodation were split between preferring phone and email.

The hostel owners and guides tended to have the highest level of education, often some tertiary education, whereas those offering homestay and local food had the lowest, often not having finished primary school. This underlined the importance of Leap in promoting homestay programmes, which are often very under-marketed. The result of this is that the locals only receive occasional tourists from the agencies they have contact with.

By publicising homestay opportunities Leap hopes to bring lots more tourists in contact with locals so they can have the unique experience of sharing a day or two of their lives and provide them with the extra income they need to educate, clothe and feed their children. Search for accommodation on the Leap website to bring that extra contact with local families to your holiday, and an understanding of their culture and lives.



Louise talks to some locals...

Meet some of our recently added locals...

Be inspired and get active, remember to recommend any good local guides you use when you go travelling. That way other travellers can find them too!



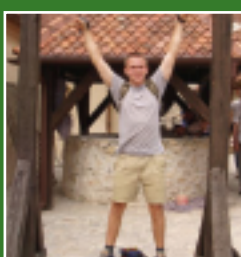
Name: **Saul Geron**
Location: Arequipa, Lima, Cusco, Nasca and others
Country: Peru
Speaks: English, Spanish, Italian, Quechua
Services: Accommodation, food, tours, sport, other
Recommended by: Kirsten Koza



Name: **Cesare Inocenti**
Location: Cusco
Country: Peru
Speaks: English, French, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, German
Services: Tours
Recommended by: Louise Norton



Name: **Rikki 'the nature man'**
Location: Puerto Viejo-Manzanillo
Country: Costa Rica
Speaks: English, Spanish
Services: Tours, incl. jungle trek
Recommended by: Jean-Claude Vallieres



Name: **Horia Emil Matei**
Location: Transylvania
Country: Romania
Speaks: English, Romanian (N.B. the local guides who work with Horia speak various European languages as well)
Services: Accommodation, food, tours, sport, other
Recommended by: Kirsten Koza

But is it... Is it possible to have an adventure when on a guided tour?

By Kirsten Koza

This adventure-travel snob tests 3 self-propelled 'local' tours to see if they provide the 'adventure' they promise.

An ad for an 'adventure spa' caught my eye, but before mocking them, I opened their website to see if they offered treatments involving bee venom and uric acid. They didn't - it was typical spa-fare, not a leech to be seen.

A Google-search for 'adventure travel' results in over 16-million companies and individuals promising adventure. Estimates on adventure travel industry-sizes vary massively between \$40-billion and \$245-billion US. But do any of these operators truly offer the adventure they claim in their name? I've parachuted in Russia, was held at gunpoint in Honduras and have a fairly good idea of what an adventure entails, but just to be certain, I looked 'adventure' up in several dictionaries and found these key words: exciting, danger, hazard, risk, uncertain outcome, peril, and mercenary soldier. Armed with this definition and fellow adventure seekers, I tested 3 'local' tour-companies from the Internet.

Mountain biking Dracula's stomping grounds with adventuretransylvania.com

'I think I'm going to have to take that bike ride off the tour,' said Horia Matei, Romanian guide and owner of the family business. Horia was referring to an entire day spent lost, not far from his family's farm, in Transylvania's rugged Piatra Craiului Mountains. The extensive trail network and signs had suddenly changed. Recent felled trees blocked old paths and new paths led to dead ends. Horia's maps from the previous season were suddenly useless. He had to use his knowledge of the mountains to lead us. We'd still be there, if not for him. We escaped a forest fire, battled stinging nettles and as I lay under my bike in a streambed - I looked up at the abundant foliage and puzzled how air rescue would find us, if someone broke a leg. 'There's no such thing as helicopter rescue in Transylvania.'

We were back in Bran, near Dracula's castle. My trip partner, from Alberta Canada, was soaking in a wood-fire heated bath. Horia's mother-in-law had chopped the wood. My friend paraphrased the Lonely Planet from her steamy cauldron. 'Mountain rescue is voluntary and there isn't a budget for air rescue. They also warn that both trails and signs are being changed.'

Romania had still more unexpected adventure and obstacles for our guide. 'You are the first people in the world to carry your bicycles to the top of Mt. Cocora!' congratulated Ginel. We hadn't planned on setting any records in the Bucegi Mountains.

Ginel introduced us to his wife Gina. Gina hadn't left the summit of Mt. Cocora in a decade. They had a record book in their shiny metal chalet. We signed it and were given cooked ham. We'd expected the first gruelling day of ascent but day-2 of our climb was supposed to be inside a cable car. The cable car died upon our arrival and now we are record holders for having to carry our mountain bikes to the top of Cocora. Our trophy - besides the ham - was a rocketing 2-hour downhill ride, followed by swigging intoxicating plum-hooch called Tuica.

Horia jumped through flaming hoops keeping us happy and overfed but still we managed to tick every definition of 'adventure' off the list except 'peril' and 'mercenary soldiers.'

Cycling ruthless terrain with peruadventurestours.com

'Here, try some coca leaves for altitude sickness. I told you not to drink so much Pisco last night,' said Saul (pronounced Sah-ool) Ceron, the indigenous tour leader at Peru Adventure Tours. He passed a baggie to my trip pals and we stuffed the leaves inside our cheeks. We were bicycling at 4300 metres, with a view of Mt. Ampato, where the mummified body of Juanita the Ice Maiden was discovered. From there we had a steep, rocky, descent into the Colca Canyon, two times deeper than the Grand Canyon.

Our off-the-beaten-path route landed us in the middle of a bull fighting festival in Huambo. We were hauled centre ring by villagers. The crowd was whipped into excitement by men in military fatigues with blackened faces. Ten bulls were released into the ring with us. The men were more intimidating. The leader asked me for kisses. I added 'guerrilla' to my definition and crossed it out and ticked 'mercenary soldier'. Saul shook his head and whispered to me, 'conductor of the marching band.'

Hours deeper into the canyon and I was sitting reading the hospital admissions sign. 'Necropsy, 90 Soles.' The \$30 autopsy is the most expensive procedure the Colca Canyon hospital offers. Two of my trip partners had fallen biking. They needed X-rays for broken bones, not an autopsy, but the small hospital doesn't have an X-ray machine. My companions were pumped full of pain meds for the next couple days until we reached Lake Titicaca and Puno, where Saul didn't just have to deal with broken bones but also our festival of vomit - followed by the great debate regarding the cause of so much puke.

Peru Adventure Tours provides massive support and yet they live up to the 'adventure' in their name.



Impenetrable Bran Castle, known as Dracula's Castle, Transylvania Romania. (photo credit Helen Neuman)



Setting a world record in Romania. Helen Neuman from Alberta poses at the summit of Mt. Cocora. First in the world to carry mountain bikes to the peak.



Chewing coca leaves relieves altitude sickness. Bicycling at 4300 metres in the Andes.



Peru Adventure Tours lives up to the 'adventure' in their name. Bullfighting ring, Huambo, Colca Canyon.



Spelunking in bat caves, Guatemala. (photo credit Terri Whitehead)

Spelunking & lava leaping with AdventureGuatemala.com

'Uncertain outcome' - we had to cross rapids and climb a cliff to the bat caves at Finca Paraíso, Guatemala. We were below a thermal waterfall, wading waist-deep in a rain-swollen jungle river near Río Dulce. Leslie Belson, from Ottawa, was forced off her feet and was clawing at the cliff wall as she was swept downstream. 'That was the scariest moment of my life,' Leslie said later. This confession came from a woman who broke her back bicycling the previous year.

Scarier than the jungle rapids, and scarier than wading ankle deep in hot guano with bats flying around my head - was crossing fissures with molten lava flowing below. I was terrified that my synthetic sports clothes were going to permanently fuse to my skin. We climbed Pacaya Volcano at sunset when the rest of the tourists were leaving. The freshly hardened lava-crust made an ominous hollow crunch underfoot. The heavy soles of my Merrell boots melted. We cooked dinner over lava, by the light of our head-lamps, while neighbouring Fuego Volcano erupted.

Luisa Zea is a Guatemalan guide, extreme athlete and general manager of the tour company. She said, 'Some guides here will do anything for money. They risk their lives for very little money because they are poor. They take people right to the crater but it is too dangerous.' Pacaya has claimed the life of one tourist according to the US state department. It has injured 12, has been continuously erupting since 1965, and is considered one of the most active volcanoes in the world. Fuego has claimed more lives than Pacaya. Santa Maria Volcano, near the popular tourist destination of Quezaltenango, has killed up to 6000 locals. Happily for us, Luisa Zea offered 'adventure' without 'peril'.

Surprisingly, 'adventure' is available within the safety net of a guided tour. Some companies, such as the spa, misuse the trendy word 'adventure' to create excitement where there is none. These companies also confuse the statistics regarding industry-size. However, my 'mercenary soldier' might find a lavender-rub and manicure to be quite adventurous. To guard against the unwanted-adventure, it is wise to read guidebooks, even when using a tour provider. The Lonely Planet now offers an online service, so you can purchase just the individual chapters you need.

Kirsten Koza is a travel writer and author. Photographs from these trips and others can be seen on her website: www.kirstenkoza.com



Fuego Volcano can be seen erupting from Pacaya Volcano. Guatemala.



Terri Whitehead, field research assistant from University of Calgary, lava leaping on Pacaya Volcano, Guatemala.



Pay increases for Inca trail porters mask other problems

On Peru's Inca trail to Machu Picchu, the government has tightened up control of the regulations designed to improve pay and conditions for porters by fining agencies that do not comply or even taking away their permit to operate on the Inca trail. Some porters say that they are being paid 40 soles (£8) per day, as required by law, double what most were being paid in 2004. This increase in wages has rippled out, increasing wages of labourers in the region from around 17 soles to 22 soles per day in the last year. However, there are still agencies that pay their porters just 15 soles and avoid sanctions by forcing them to sign receipts for more.

Agencies are now supplying more equipment for porters but the weight limits sometimes confound these improvements. One cook for a reputable up-market agency commented that they have to remove the metal frame from their carrying harnesses because it weighs two kilos and would put them over the limit, bringing sanctions for the agency. They also leave behind tents for porters to sleep in, so that many still sleep in the cooking tent on the bare ground.

The more you pay the greater the chances that your porters receive fair pay but even then the bureaucratic tangle that surrounds Machu Picchu makes it hard to guarantee porter conditions. To hike ethically for a fraction of the cost, with a horse to carry your pack, find a recommended guide on www.leaplocal.org for another beautiful, unspoilt trail, like that to the hot springs in Lares. Soak away the muscle ache with a clean conscience then hop on the train to see Machu Picchu.



We are always interested in your views on Leap, our newsletter and our website so welcome all your ideas and feedback. If you want to get in touch please go to the 'contact us' section of our website. And for the more experienced travellers amongst you, we are always looking for people to help expand Leap Local to other developing countries. If you come across a local guide or service why not recommend them to another traveller through our website? And if the travel writer in you is waiting to get out, feel free to submit some 'How to go Local' guides.