

Inca gold



With 'once in a lifetime' trips more accessible than ever before and no corner of the globe too inaccessible, Ian Kerr makes another tick on his 'motorcycle trips to do before I die' list with a memorable ride across Peru in a land of stunning mountain vistas and iconic historical sights.



Travelling is like reading the first chapter of a good book: once you start it's hard to stop. The only difference being that, with travel, there is no last chapter or page – it is infinite, the only controlling factors being time and money. Nowadays, though, travel is relatively easy with a myriad of companies offering everything from beach to adventure holidays. You can fly, go by road, ship, train, cycle or just walk ... the choices are almost limitless.

Over here in Europe we are lucky with a large land mass easily accessible by good air, road, boat and train links, where nowhere is really a problem to get to relatively quickly. Major capital cities, mountain ranges, coastline with masses of climatic variations are not but a few hours away. Even from the UK a quick hour on boat from Dover, or a train under the English Channel is not too much of a problem, or a limiting factor.

The nature of the beast

The actual business of travelling though can be good or bad depending on your point of view. If you just want to reach a destination, then it is probably the latter. However, travel by motorcycle is all part of the experience as most touring/adventure riders will tell you. It is the 'nature of the beast' that you are exposed to your environment in a way that makes you accessible to locals who are more inclined to greet you and help you in many ways; and, of course, you get to experience the smells and atmosphere that make each location/destination unique in a way that just doesn't happen in a car.

Them more of this sort of travel you do, and as you gradually work your way further afield, it is all too easy to become hooked to the point where you probably just want to sell everything, pack your bike up and go touring the world for a few years. It's a nice thought but, sadly for the vast majority of us there are restraints like families, business etc. that make that just that: an idle thought.

Compass

However, those 'little' practical realities of life never stop you looking for destinations to put on your 'must do before I die' list. If you have such a list (and how many of us don't?) then a look at the Compass Expeditions' list of tours will probably find quite a few similarities with your own.

Like many other companies what they offer is the chance to take time out to reach those locations without the hassle of a year's planning, hours on the internet, and the not inconsiderable trouble of shipping bikes; not to mention all the other things that normally go with exploration of some of the those not so close 'wish list' destinations.

And this is what really attracted me to Compass, having been on quite a few other trips – the fact they were going to allow me a few ticks on my list, with a good mix of foreign culture and superb motorcycle roads, but in complete safety with good back-up. Unlike some other companies, the places they go are not ones you would want to consider doing on your own without some back-



ground support. Naturally, it all looked good on the Web but, as they say, the proof of this particular 'ride of a lifetime pudding', would be in the eating. So, emails exchanged, dates agreed on the 'Highlights of Peru' trip it was just a case of setting things straight at home as I would be gone for nearly three weeks. Unlike other operators, Compass do not include travel to and from as part of the time spent, so 14 days is pure riding time, there are extra days either side which form part of the experience.

First up was very comprehensive briefing pack arriving by email including a useful potted history of South America, all good for helping you understand what you are going to see. In fact, I can't think of things that were not included, so comprehensive was the pack, even simple language tips were included so you did not feel a complete fool with the locals.

Unfortunately, 30 hours travel from Blighty could not be avoided, including all the inevitable delays, so it was a relief to say the least to finally arrive at La Paz in Bolivia – the starting point for our epic ride – and to find a cab driver holding up a card with my name on it in 'Arrivals' as promised. A 20-minute ride brought us to a pretty individual hotel near the centre of town and a welcome bed.

Acclimatisation

The following morning tour leader Brendan introduced himself and gave me a rundown on what was to follow, including the need to acclimatise to the altitude. A gentle tour of the city had been arranged to help me unwind and get to grips with the culture. The afternoon was spent in the colourful market next to the hotel and buying a local T-shirt before having a quick nap to after all that tiring travel.

Early evening saw all my fellow tour participants meet up in the hotel for a comprehensive briefing and the inevitable paperwork, before we headed out to an excellent restaurant to get to know each other.

After a reasonable breakfast we caught a cab to an unprepossessing spot on the outskirts of town where our BMW GS 650 F bikes were garaged. Here we went through a thorough briefing and a short familiarisation ride to ensure we were all happy. Traffic conditions were, of course, very different to what many of us are used to, and 'slow and steady' was to be the object of the first day.

The original plan was to head out toward the border with Peru and thence onto Puno on the banks of Lake Titicaca, but Brendan had got wind of a volatile developing political situation in Peru and re-routed us to Copacabana on the Bolivian side of the lake. We, of course, were oblivious to all of this.

A stop for lunch on our first leg in the middle of nowhere had us scratching our heads until Leo, our back-up driver, pulled up and several tables piled high with fresh food appeared magically from the cavernous trailer hitched to the Toyota. This was to be the standard for most days and it must be said the word 'hungry' was never to be heard on the tour. >>>



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>>> More surprises were to come as we headed down for the crossing point that justifies the Bolivian Navy's existence in a landlocked country. The 'ferry' consisted of large barges with planks of wood powered by an outboard motor. Bike security? Well that was down to us – just stand there and hold it was the order of the day.

Barry Manilow

The ride down to the small lakeside town was just like dropping down to a Mediterranean resort, and the hastily arranged hotel was right on the front with stunning views and five-star food and accommodation. Best of all, there was no Barry Manilow singing about the better known location of the same name!

The rescheduling meant we would unfortunately not be able to take in the floating Uros reed islands, but by way of ample compensation we were able to enjoy a pleasant two-hour cruise on the lake to the Isla Del Sol (Island of the Sun), with a chance to start learning about the Inca civilisation that would be central to our travels. A relaxing day ended with a meal in town after watching an amazing sunset.

An early start was called for the next day in order to clear the border crossing into Peru. What seemed like an amazingly quick three hours had us on our way to Puno, our original stopping point, and by the time lunch was taken, all had agreed the change had been a very good deal.

The only downside was that we then had a slightly longer ride than scheduled and finally arrived in Cusco early evening, having dodged the rocks left in the road by the political protesters. Still it all adds to the experience and the food in the hotel, which was once again quite unique and well worth the journey!

Inca civilisation

The following day we were free to explore the city, which was once the capital of the Inca civilisation. There was no problem finding things to do with museums, markets and historic buildings virtually on every corner. The Plaza de Armas was superbly atmospheric, and sitting overlooking it from the Norton Rats biker bar certainly added to the experience. (Although it made us feel just a little guilty to know Brendan and Leo were working hard checking the bikes over and doing all the maintenance – as they did every day to ensure we had a trouble free ride while enjoying ourselves!)

The next day it was back on the bikes for a ride out through the Sacred Valley after having stopped and looked at Saqsayhu-man, a large Inca historic site above Cusco – impressive, but nothing compared to our

destination of Ollantaytambo where we parked the bikes. This amazing Inca ruin set into the side of the mountain served as just a taster of the cultural and scenic delights to follow.

Bikes parked and armed with our own personal guide, we boarded the train to Aguas Calientes at the base of Machu Picchu. The train ride through the mountains allowed us to see the Inca trail which many chose to walk!

Another unique hotel provided a short night's sleep, rising at 4am to queue for the bus that was to take us up to Machu Picchu and a chance to climb the mountain Waynapichu so famous from photographs of the area. Only four hundred people a day are allowed to make the climb and this was once again a good example of having inside knowledge as we made the first group, thanks to our guide. Thanks to the entire Compass organisation things were organised like clockwork.

Awesome scale

Just like the Grand Canyon, until you stand at the location you cannot comprehend its size and being, no matter how many pictures you have looked at, or films you may have seen.

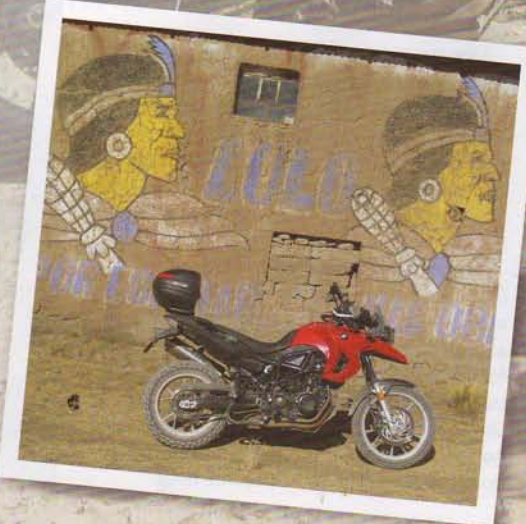
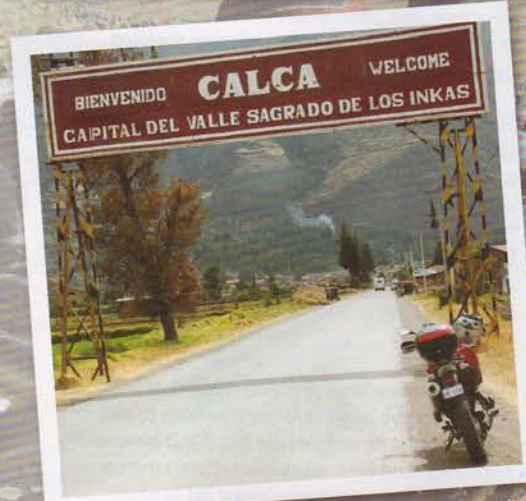
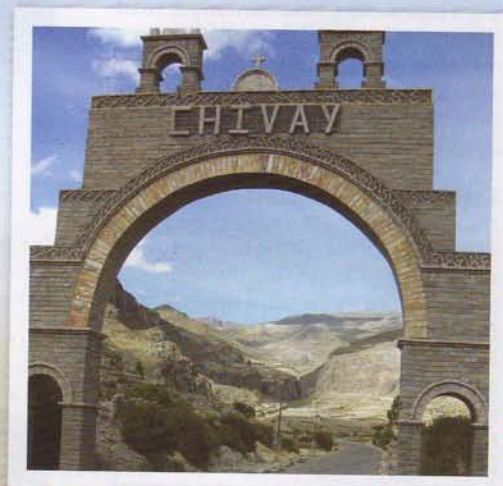
After an energetic morning it was back on the train after lunch to pick the bikes up and ride back to Cusco. A different route on some superb blacktop followed by an excellent meal in another extraordinary restaurant was a good way to end a mind-blowingly superb day.

The next day was once again free to catch up with washing and see any parts of the ancient city we may have missed.

The following day saw us head out of town on the Pan American Highway, before turning off onto hard packed gravel and making for the remote settlement of Yauri. This small town was totally devoid of the trappings of tourism and gave a feel of the real Peru.

An early start saw us head back on hard-packed gravel roads to Chivay, regarded as the gateway to the Colca Canyon, the world's second deepest canyon, the other just being over the ridge! This day saw us cross one of the highest passes on the tour at 4,800m. It must be said the bikes coped well with all the altitude changes and performed faultlessly.

The end of the day saw us take advantage of the hot springs, these taking away any aches and pains and relaxing us for an early night, to enable an early start the next day to ride up the canyon and watch the massive Condors ride on thermals. These birds were very much part of the Inca history and watching them swoop and glide high above



the jagged peaks it was easy to see why.

From there it was just a case of winding our way down to Arequipa on some excellent roads, gradually descending from the altitudes we had become used to. The city traffic came as something of a shock, but bikes were soon parked in the rear of another excellent and well-positioned hotel.

Catalina convent

Close to the Plaza de Armas and other treasures like the Catalina Convent which was not opened to the public until 1970 having been closed since 1580, it was an excellent base for another bike-free day and a chance to explore and enjoy the culture.

Once again refreshed, with the bikes now clean and tidy thanks to some hard work by Leo, we headed off to the coast, continuing our descent. The bikes too became noticeably more perky, which was useful as we headed up one of the best biking roads in the world.

Precariously hugging the Peruvian coastline, continually twisting and turning as well as climbing and dropping, it led us to the overnight stop at Puerto Inca. This small bay houses many bones and skeletons from the past in open excavations and once again provided a totally unique place to stay overnight before our last day's ride.

Iconic images from a 'once in a lifetime' ride: preceding title page, iconic Machu Pichu

Final destination

With some sadness we headed further up the coast, dodging sand drifts and heavy winds, towards Nazca our final destination.

A stop at the cemetery of Chauchilla allowing us to see the mummies propped up in their open graves and learn more about the history of Peru before ending up at our hotel on the outskirts of Nazca. After lunch, a flight over the famous Nazca Lines seemed a fitting end to the trip and a last look at some of the totally unique history of Peru.

Fourteen days excellent riding on bikes that had performed faultlessly and a camera full of excellent memories that should keep dinner tables entertained for the next few years!

All that was left was a bus ride to Lima with an afternoon's sightseeing prior to flights home the following day. These two days passed, like the rest, without problems thanks to the excellent organisation and tireless behind-the-scenes work of Brendan and Leo.

It has to be said that, while we all like adventure, most of us like to have the insurance policy tucked in the back pocket just in case it goes wrong. We hope we never need it, but it does allow you

to enjoy life knowing it is there. In this case it was all in place, but discreet and very laid back, Aussie style!

Seven wonders

I very much doubt that I could have enjoyed such a hassle free trip even with a year's worth of plotting and planning. Given the number of these sorts of trips I have done, this was among the very best, combining some excellent motorcycling with the chance to see a couple of the new 'seven wonders of the world'.

The only trouble is that, while Compass have enabled me to make a couple of ticks on my wish list, the fantastic range of tours they run has added a few more. Still, I know that when I get round to them I'll have a Compass five-star adventure to leave me with a huge grin on my face and an immense feeling of satisfaction! (www.compassexpeditions.com)

