

Peru' trip - which takes nearly three weeks - because unlike other operators they do not include travel time, so you have fourteen days riding time. There are extra days 'free time' either side too, forming part of the overall experience.

ON TOUR

Before departing, a comprehensive briefing pack arrived, including a useful potted history of South America, which set the tone for a well-organised tour that left nothing to chance. When I arrived at our starting point in La Paz, Bolivia, there was even a cab waiting to take me straight to my overnight hotel!

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 and atmosphere.

Early evening saw all my fellow tour participants meet up in the hotel for a comprehensive briefing and some inevitable paperwork, before we headed out to an excellent restaurant to get to know each other. After a reasonable breakfast the following morning, we caught a cab to the BMW GS 650 F bikes garaged on the outskirts of town and again went through a thorough briefing and a short familiarisation ride to ensure we were all happy.

Originally we should have headed out and towards the border with Peru and continued onto Puno on the banks of Lake Titicaca, but Brendan had heard that the political situation in Peru was a little volatile and re-routed us to Copacabana on the Bolivian side of the lake. This rescheduling meant we would not be able to take in the Floating Uros Reed Islands, so instead we had a pleasant two hour cruise on the lake to the Isla Del Sol (Island of the Sun) and a chance to start learning about the Inca civilisation that would be central to our travels.

A stop for lunch in the middle of nowhere had us scratching our heads until Leo, our back-up driver, pulled up with tables and fresh food. This was to be the standard for most days and it must be said hungry was never to be a word uttered on the tour - morning, noon or night!

An early start was called for the next day in order to clear the border crossing into Peru. An amazingly quick three hours had us on our way to Cusco, the original capital of the Inca civilisation, with a free day afterward to explore while the bikes were checked over - something that happened every day.

The next day it was back on the bikes for a ride out through the Sacred Valley to Ollantaytambo and yet another amazing Inca ruin set into the side of a mountain. We then left the bikes and boarded the train to Aguas Calientes at the base of Machu Picchu.

After a short night's sleep, we rose at 4am to queue for the bus that was to take us up to Machu Picchu and a chance to climb the mountain Waynapichu, which dominates all our pictures. Just like the Grand Canyon, until you stand at the location you cannot comprehend its size, no matter how many pictures you have looked at.

After an energetic morning it was back on the train after lunch to pick the bikes up and ride back to Cusco and another free day.

An early start to the following day 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 next day saw us up early to ride up the canyon and watch the massive Condors soar on thermals. From there it was just case of winding our way down to Arequipa the second largest city in Peru on some excellent roads, gradually descending from the altitudes we had become used to. This led to another free day to explore, before heading off to the coast for the last leg of the tour.

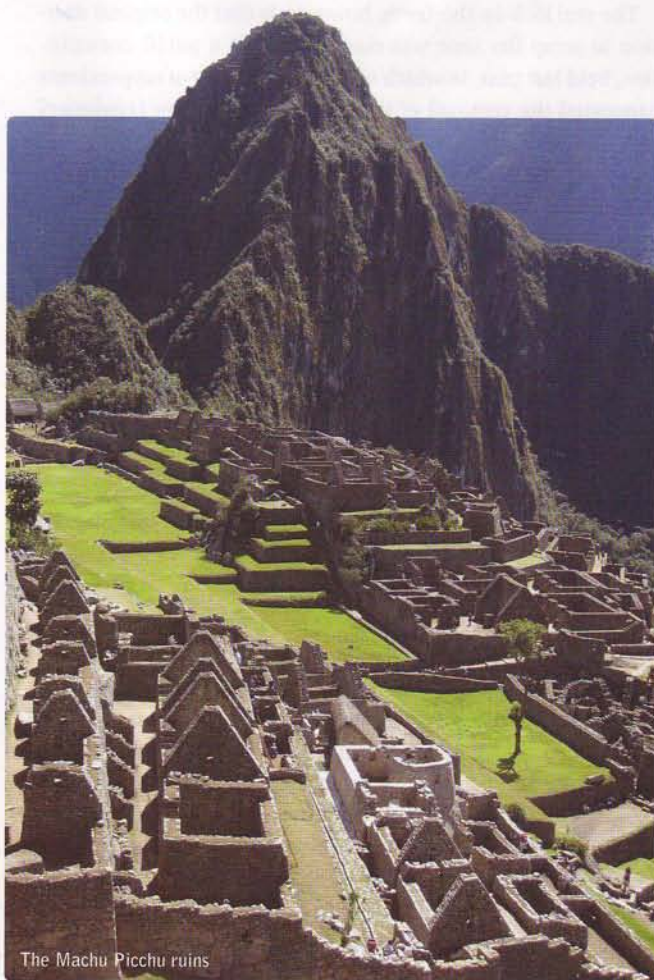
Precariously hugging the Peruvian coastline, continually twisting and turning as well as climbing and dropping, it lead us to the overnight stop at Puerto Inca, a small resort directly on the coast.

WRAPPING UP

The last day saw us head further up the coast, dodging sand drifts and heavy winds towards Nazca - our final destination. 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, before heading to Lima the following day and starting the trip home.

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 thanks to some excellent work by Compass Expeditions! «

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The Machu Picchu ruins