



Living the high life

The Belmond Andean Explorer snakes through Peru along one of the highest train routes on earth. Altitude sickness tablets at the ready...

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It's 3am, I'm sat bolt upright in bed and I can't quite believe my eyes. Outside the window of my cabin is a scene like nothing I've ever witnessed. High winds send billows of snow spiralling around the peaks of colossal white-topped mountains. The inky blue sky is scattered with an army of fierce, twinkling stars. It wouldn't look out of place on a David Attenborough show or in a Philip Pullman novel. It's almost hallucinogenic, I think. Like something from a vivid dream. At least it would be, were it not for the stonking headache that's hammering away in my brain.

It's my first night onboard the Belmond Andean Explorer – South America's first luxury sleeper train – and the altitude sickness is keeping me awake. The train runs along one of the world's



highest train routes from Arequipa, Peru's second largest city, to Cusco, home of the Sacred Valley and some of the country's finest Inca ruins. Owned by Belmond (formerly Orient-Express), it used to wind along Australia's east coast, before it was packed up and shipped across the Pacific to Cusco, where it was lovingly refurbished with a whopping \$10 million budget to its dazzling appearance today.

Comprising 24 en-suite cabins, a piano bar (complete with baby grand piano), two dining carts and a spa carriage, the train's décor is unapologetically luxurious – all brass luggage racks, Art Nouveau ceilings and mahogany wood panelling, finished with a flourish of neon pom-



poms and taxidermied butterflies on the walls. Cabins come in four denominations, from bunk bed suites to luxurious doubles, all with soft alpaca furnishings, beautiful parquet floor bathrooms and a secret sliding window that means you can soak up the view from the other side of the train too.

Our 700km journey is set to take three days, with the train weaving through the craggy mountain pathways of the Altiplano and High Andes, climbing up to over 14,000 ft (where condors soar and mountain lions prey on skittish camelids). The altitude is not for everybody – the train's onboard nurse Mary is always on hand to deploy oxygen masks, mountain sickness tablets and lashings of coca tea (a brew made from the raw ingredient of cocaine). But with such staggering mountain views on offer, it's worth a little migraine, surely.

Like most who will take this route, our journey is sandwiched between a few days exploring Peru's



mountain ranging

Belmond Andean Explorer two-night Andean Plains and Islands of Discovery journey from Arequipa to Cusco, from \$1,405 (£1,070) per person based on two sharing a cabin on a full board basis, including activities, tours and an open bar, belmond.com. British Airways flies Gatwick to Lima from £658, britishairways.com. For more information, peru.travel

capital, Lima – a must-visit for anyone who likes their cultural breaks with a healthy side of world-class cuisine. After exploring the city's dusty catacombs, gothic cathedrals and bewitching libraries (I urge you to visit the atmospheric hidden library at the Monastery of San Francisco), we set about filling our stomachs with some of the finest, award-winning food Peru has to offer.

At Maido, which currently sits at number eight on the World's 50 Best Restaurants list, we tackled an ambitious tasting menu of the finest Nikkei cuisine – the perfect marriage of Japanese and Peruvian gastronomy (the fish hot dog and dim sum with squid were standouts). Somehow we also found room for the 18-course tasting menu at Central, where experimental chef Virgilio Martínez – Peru's answer to Heston – serves up a menagerie of courses: from desiccated sweet potato leaves, served tangled in brambles, to dried piranha skin served on infuriated-looking toothy fish heads. Real theatre on a plate.

Luckily, there was no weight limit for the scenic internal flight to Arequipa, where we boarded the Andean Explorer as the sun set. The food on board is just as luxurious as in Lima, and we soon settle into the routine. It's easy: by morning we eat fresh pastries whipped up by the train's designated baker, and by night we feast on local delicacies, from alpaca tortellini to river trout ceviche – as the mighty mountains whizz past outside and storms light up the horizon.



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Water world

On our first morning onboard we wake up quayside, before trading our train for a boat to take us across the mesmerising Lake Titicaca. The world's highest navigable lake is home to more than 530 aquatic species, as well as the floating totora reed islands of Uros, which were built and

are still inhabited by a civilization that pre-dates the Incans. As we float ashore we're greeted by an indigenous family in rainbow-coloured local dress, singing traditional Quechua songs. We're given a hut building demonstration before being shown inside the fawn-coloured dwellings – some with solar panels and radios inside – and neon handicrafts are laid out for us to peruse.

We spend the afternoon feasting on pico de gallo, cocktail potatoes and fresh river trout on the nearby sun-baked Taquile Island. Here, locals explain how they value a man by the quality of his knitting (he may only choose a wife when he is able to create a hat so tightly woven that it can hold water). Then we head back to the train for another evening of first-class Peruvian hospitality.

When dawn breaks the next day, the watery sun illuminates an ethereal mist-filled valley, pockmarked with grazing sheep, chicken and alpacas. From here, we disembark to explore Raqch'i, a towering red adobe clay Incan temple, surrounded by sites of human sacrifice high up in the mountains and old



looted tombs where the Incans used to store their mummies.

On our final afternoon, we take to the observation cart at the rear of the train as it rumbles lazily alongside the top end of the Amazon river, towards its resting point at Cusco. It's here

where the Andes really come alive, as we soak up the soaring eagles and snow-topped mountain peaks; the donkeys, cows and locals going about their daily business – all with a pisco sour cocktail in hand. For all its luxury, the views here really are what it's all about. Train travel surely doesn't get any better than this. ■