



Advertisement

Advertisement



Olivier Elbaz
Global Head of Expansion | Senior Advisor | Tech Investor & LP | Promoted by Deel

Is your Payroll system holding you back? [Change.org](#), the world's largest platform for social change with over half a billion users in 196 countries, faced similar challenges. Managing a patchwork of payroll...

deel. Deel

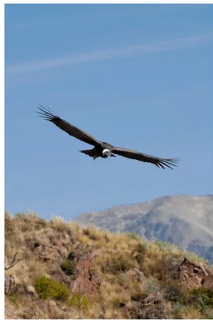
[Learn more](#)

DESTINATIONS > CENTRAL & SOUTH AMERICA > PERU

I Hiked Past Slot Canyons and Ancient Ruins, Shopped for Cozy Alpaca Blankets, and Stayed at the Decadent New Hotels in Southern Peru

Here's how to visit Colca Canyon and Arequipa in Southern Peru.

By [Mark Johanson](#) | Published on December 14, 2023



From left: A condor soars above Peru's Colca Canyon; Mirador Cruz del Condor, a popular place to spot condors in Colca Canyon. PHOTO: FROM LEFT: OLIVER BOLCH/ANZENBERGER/REDUX; AGEFOTOSTOCK/ALAMY

Sunbeams spilled over snow-dusted hills into southern Peru's Colca Canyon, sparking the morning migration of condors, earth's largest birds of prey. At first, in that indigo hour, there was just a solitary bird. It surfed the thermals without ever needing to bat a wing, showing a grace and serenity that, upon closer inspection, belied its gawky face. Then three more condors careened into view, gliding up the yawning chasm so close to my cliff-top perch that I could feel their tailwinds.

Pre-Incan cultures viewed these birds as messengers of the gods, explained Vladimir Canazas, my guide from [SA Expeditions](#). "The feeling of seeing these condors up close is so emotional that it affects me every time," he said. I quickly understood why. The 40-odd condors nesting along this stretch of the canyon seemed oblivious to the crowds that, enchanted by their acrobatics, marveled from above. Just to the west of us, Colca Canyon plunged like an abyss, cleaving a scar into the Andes twice as deep as the Grand Canyon.



The city of Arequipa, with the Misti Volcano in the distance. PHOTO: PIERRE LEPRETRE/GETTY IMAGES

Advertisement

Advertisement

TUDO LO QUE TE GUSTA, POR UN PRECIO INCREÍBLE

HBO Discovery CN max networks DC

ID Netflix Premium HBO Max h&h

DISPONIBLE AHORA

APROVECHA MAX POR 5 MESES

¡6,90 /MES

max

EN TU PLAN BÁSICO CON ANUNCIOS MENSUAL

SUSCRÍBETE AHORA

Advertisement

Advertisement

Advertisement

DEL cine a max

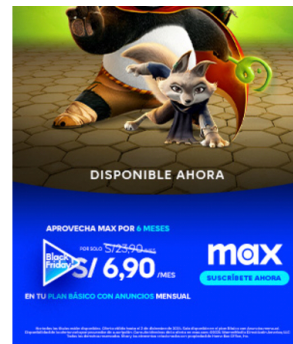
PRESENTADO POR

KUNG FU PANDA 4

Despite its beauty, few Americans have heard of Colca Canyon. For decades, the canyon and nearby Arequipa, Peru's second-largest city, were off the radar for foreigners. But over the past few years, freshly paved roads have made the region easier to access, and the opening of several high-end accommodations has made it a comfortable perch for a few days of adventure travel.

I had come to Colca Canyon to hike past ancient ruins and even older terraced fields of potatoes, lima beans, and quinoa. Canazas and I trekked along dusty trails near the arid canyon rim to ruins like the Chimpa Fortress, a small citadel with panoramic views. We strolled the ancient paths of Uyo Uyo, a pre-Inca settlement that dates from the 14th century, where San Pedro cactuses now wrap around stone houses.

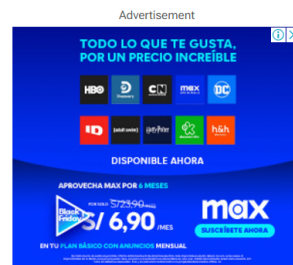
At night I relaxed at one of the 20 eucalyptus-shaded cottages at [Las Casitas](#), a [Belmond Hotel, Colca Canyon](#), which is located on an alpaca farm. (The grazing animals also serve as the property's de facto landscapers.) At Curiña, the hotel's restaurant, I dined on risotto and artichokes before retreating to my outdoor heated plunge pool with a Sancayo Sour (pisco blended with cactus fruit) to soothe my sore muscles and scan the inky sky for the Southern Cross.



Advertisement



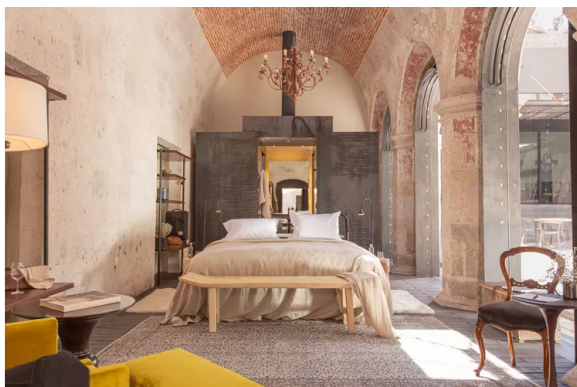
From left: An alleyway at the Santa Catalina Monastery, in Arequipa; Las Casitas, a Belmond Hotel, Colca Canyon. PHOTO: FROM LEFT: RENZO TASSO/COURTESY OF PERU TOURISM; COURTESY OF BELMOND



Advertisement

After two nights in Colca Canyon, Canazas and I drove four hours south through the Salinas & Aguada Blanca National Reserve, where the wetlands brimmed with flamingos and skittish vicuñas, to Arequipa. Tucked between three towering volcanoes, it is often referred to as the White City because of the pale volcanic rock used in many of the colonial-era buildings. Since its founding in 1540, Arequipa has been a breeding ground for intellectuals and political rebels, including the novelist, Nobel laureate, and Peru's most famous writer, Mario Vargas Llosa. (There's even a house museum there dedicated to Vargas Llosa.)

As I walked Arequipa's cobblestoned streets to the Santa Catalina Monastery, passing flowering courtyards and Baroque façades, I couldn't help feeling like I was in southern Italy rather than South America. [Cirqa](#), a small Relais & Châteaux property that opened in 2019, has a European look to it. When I stepped into the vaulted lobby of this former monastery, I soaked in the hushed, ecclesiastical atmosphere as palo santo and *muna*, the Andean mint, wafted through the space. The 11 guest rooms are spare, but their heavy stone walls and iron chandeliers give them a feeling of grandeur. In the evening, the rooftop terrace was a lovely spot to watch as the mountain snowcaps turned amber in the lowering light.



A guest room at Arequipa's Cirqa hotel, housed in a former monastery. PHOTO: COURTESY OF BELMOND

Arequipa is the home of Peru's booming alpaca industry, and I found cozy sweaters and blankets at shops like [Kuna](#) and [Sol Alpaca](#), both just steps away from the hotel. The city's food scene, meanwhile, was as unique as its character — UNESCO named Arequipa a City of Gastronomy in 2019. I tried *chupe de camarones*, a river-shrimp soup, and lamb ribs at local institutions like [Chicha](#) and [La Nueva Palomino](#). The hearty fare would fuel my daily hikes into the verdant Chilina Valley and the slot canyon Quebrada de Culebrillas.

Three volcanoes lord over Arequipa like hulking giants: Pichu Pichu (18,583 feet), Chachani (19,872 feet), and Misti (19,101 feet). The latter is cartoonishly conical and notoriously feisty. "If Misti has a big eruption one day, we'll all be dead," Canazas said, eyes wide, when it first came into view on our drive into town. "We'll become the new Pompeii overnight." Heeding his warning, I set off on a solo mountain-bike trip down Misti's placid neighbor, Pichu Pichu, on my last day. The descent was more than 3,000 feet. I zigzagged on a single-lane road from the scrub-covered summit into terraced lowland fields below. All the while, the setting sun morphed from amber to gold. In those fleeting moments of free fall, I imagined that I was one with the condors. I soared, with as much grace as I could muster, and wound my way back home.

A version of this story first appeared in the October 2023 issue of Travel + Leisure under the headline "Peak Peru."

Related Articles



PERU

This 3,200-square-mile Lake Straddles Two South American Countries and Is Brimming With Ancient History

By Gabriel Urza



PERU

This Region of Peru Has Incredible Ancient Ruins — Without Machu Picchu's Crowds

By Tom Vanderbilt



PERU

This Indigenous-owned Tour Company in Peru Has Women-only Hiking Trips That Include Camping in Glass Domes, Cooking Classes, and a Visit to an Alpaca Farm

By Stacey Leasca



PERU

Lima Travel Guide

By Megan Wood



PERU

From Luxury Resorts to Delicious Street Food: 12 Reasons to Visit Peru



PERU

From Luxury Resorts to Delicious Street Food: 12 Reasons to Visit Peru

By Andrea Romano



PERU

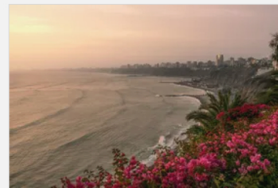
Peru's Rainbow Mountain Is an Incredible Display of Color



PERU

Peru's Rainbow Mountain Is an Incredible Display of Color — How to Visit

By Stacey Leasca and Andrea Romano



PERU

All You Need to Know About Barranco, Lima's Coolest Neighborhood



PERU

All You Need to Know About Barranco, Lima's Coolest Neighborhood

By Amanda Ogle



PERU

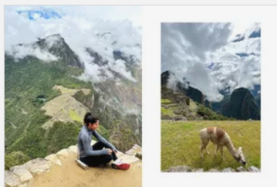
This Neighborhood in Lima Has the City's Best Food — Here's Where to



PERU

This Neighborhood in Lima Has the City's Best Food — Here's Where to Eat and Drink

By Adam Erace



PERU

I Went on My First Solo Hiking Trip in Peru — Here's How You Can, Too

By Maya Kachroo-Levine

HOTELS + RESORTS

This Stunning New Glass Dome Hotel in Peru Will Make You Feel Like You're Sleeping Among the Stars

By Stacey Leasca

PERU

Peru's Colca Canyon Is Twice As Deep As the Grand Canyon — How to Visit the Breathtaking Destination

By Stefanie Waldek

CHILE

Chile's Lake District Is Home to Some of the Country's Most Spectacular Nature Reserves and National Parks

By Mark Johanson



HOTELS + RESORTS

Take in Some of the Best Views of Patagonia at This New Lodge in Argentina

By Paul Brady



CHILE

Chile's Aysén Region Is a Dreamscape of Towering Mountains, Crystalline Lakes, and Sublime Glaciers

By Simon Willis



ARGENTINA

I Climbed the Highest Peak in the Americas — Here's How You Can, Too

By Owen Clarke



COSTA RICA

Costa Rica's Indigenous Population Is Working to Save the Planet — and This Tour Is an Inside Peek

By Tim Neville

Advertisement

Advertisement

EXPLORE THE **.WORLD DOMAIN TODAY**

Get Yours

EXPLORE THE **.WORLD DOMAIN TODAY**

Get Yours

This ad will end in 5

AV

This ad will end in 4

AV

Guédel con un aroma fresco

Is Iceland's Blue Lagoon Worth It? CLOSE X