



Spectacular views of the Colca Canyon can be observed from the Cruz del Condor viewpoint.
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The first tented camp in Peru has opened in Colca Canyon – here's what it's like

Puquio offers safari-style rooms, farm-to-table dining and hikes to the edge in Peruvian mountains.

By Damien Gabet
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“The messengers of the gods!” It’s easy to guess guide Freddy Huaracha’s favourite bird. As he speaks about the Andean condor, his voice inflects, the tone rising and falling as if following a flight. His arms swing round, hugging the view of the valley around the trail, open large like these black vultures’ record wingspans. “The Inca considered them the embodiment of the upper world, the sky, the future,” he says, wide-eyed. “Today, they bring us good fortune: every year, more people come to visit.”



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Populated by descendants of the local Collaguas people, the Colca Valley is home to a thriving weaving community.
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Freddy is guiding me on a two-mile climb from the village of Madrigal to the ruins of the pre-Incan Chimpa Fortress, a fortified high ground at 14,475ft, which he says is the best place in the entire Colca Valley to spot these giant birds. This sweeping grassland in the Andes of southern Peru, home to low-growing vegetation, gurgling volcanoes and free-roaming, alpaca-like vicuña, has long been known for its namesake Colca Canyon. Carved by the skinny, slow-moving Colca River, it's one of the world's deepest gorges and cuts through the mountains for some 50 miles. More recently, it has attracted travellers as the home of Puquio ('spring' in Quechuan), the country's first safari-like camp. It opened late last year in a clearing overlooking the river, and I'm spending a few nights in one of its eight canvas tents to explore the gorge and beyond.

The Chimpa Fortress can be reached by coach, but the experience rewards walkers: so far, I've seen no one else. What began as a dirt track wide enough for a 4WD soon tapers to a precipitous, single-track trail that winds tightly up the mountain where the fortress once stood. Below us is the prettiest quilt of farm plots — quinoa, barley, corn — each with its own flaxen hue. They're flanked by eucalyptus and swaying pampas grass, whose stems, Freddy says, local children string together to make kites.



! Puquio's safari-like camp is made up of eight canvas tents, housing two guests in each.
PHOTOGRAPH BY IVAN SALINERO

At this altitude, every step is a little victory against howling lungs and weeping legs. I stop to catch my breath, and Freddy jumps over the trail's wooden barrier to relieve a prickly pear cactus of its spikes, then twists off the fruit. "Here," he says, passing it over. "This should help." Half-pomegranate, half-watermelon, it's the sugar hit I need to reach the summit.

When I do reach it, every effort is worth it. The fortress, still remarkably intact, tells the story of the local Collaguas people, who used it to patrol the valley's water sources and fertile soil, and whose descendants still inhabit the valley. From this vantage point, the view opens up to the colossal drama of the Colca Canyon plunging around 13,120ft into the earth — double the depth of the US's Grand Canyon. It has green sandstone ridges; huge, fluted seams of shale; and the emerald scribble of the Colca River below. "Welcome to the kingdom of the condor," says Freddy. "The view's rather spectacular, don't you think?"

As if summoned, a bird appears. A white-collared male Andean condor, the largest flying bird in the world with a 10-foot wingspan, glides past, looking for a carrion breakfast — elegant, commanding, foreboding. We wait around for more sightings, but the sky goes quiet after that first flight. So, we scramble down the mountain with satisfying speed before driving back to camp.

There's a touch of safari nostalgia at Puquio. That night, beneath the light of a full pink moon, I fill my tin bath for a soak under Incan constellations, reading Wordsworth poems that have been laid out on my wooden bureau. A homely air permeates, from the alpaca-wool slippers to the no-menu restaurant.



! The culinary technique of *pachamanca* has been used since Inca times.
PHOTOGRAPH BY IVAN SALINERO

I try *peruanita* potatoes the following lunch, baked over hot stones with organic corn, broad beans, chicken and alpaca meat — all swaddled in aromatic mountain flora — in a *pachamanca* 'earth oven'. Everything on the table is either from Puquio's own garden or farmers' fields nearby. Food traditions, Freddy tells me when I meet him later, are dying out in the community. "At school, it was once toasted corn and a

later, are dying out in the community. “At school, it was once toasted corn and a piece of cheese; now, it’s sandwiches and fried everything,” he says. To save the recipes of his family and elderly neighbours, he runs independent cookery classes. “You have to try my *pesque de quinoa* [quinoa and cheese porridge],” he says. “It’s ridiculously tasty.”



I catch sight of his plot that afternoon, on a horse ride — another of Puquio’s excursions — of the hills above the neighbouring village of Yanque. Moving at a trot, I take in the details: the still-flowing Incan irrigation, the nursery terraces laid out like grand Roman amphitheatres. The bone-dry air creates a clarity of light that makes me blink at the view — especially at the Sabancaya volcano erupting in an ash cloud in the distance. As night falls, a crepuscular light tints everything purple. This is a kingdom alright, and nature reigns sovereign.

How to do it:

Two-person tents at [Puquio](#) from US\$821 (£655) per night, including transfer by car from Arequipa, which takes three hours, and all meals, activities and excursions.

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