

Friday, August 30 – Lake Titicaca, the floating islands of Uros and Isla Taquile

We have a lovely breakfast at the hotel, are picked up at 7 and off on our boat at 7:30. Our guide today is Manuel, our boat captain is Jesus (makes us feel safe on the water). This is the first time we felt silly (and a bit guilty) about having a private tour with only the two of us and guide (and drivers, boat captains/pilots, etc.). The only boats available to go to the islands are built to seat about 25-30 people, and are really designed for group tours and busloads per trip. But we got over it . . . and no need to share the head with anyone.

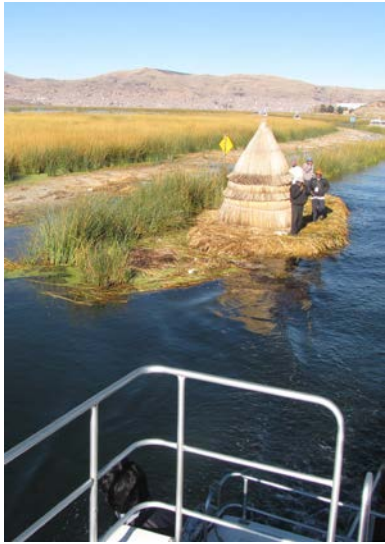


To be clear, the true name of the lake is Titiquaquá (in both Quechua and Aymara) and should be pronounced as such, lest children start to giggle. The Spanish conquerors called it Lago Del Gato Montes, meaning lake of the Mountain Cat (Puma is the cat it refers to), and that is what Titiquaquá means in the Aymara language, Gray Puma. The lake is fed by many, many small rivers from the Andes, but there is one major river out.

Around Puno the lake is shallow, perhaps six feet, and filled with reeds. There is pollution near the city and therefore algae. We don't ask about sewage disposal methods. The shallowness attracts all sorts of water birds: coots, ducks, ibis, geese, grebes, terns, cormorants, but we are putt-putting past them too fast to get "identification" looks. The tourist boats here are equipped with reconditioned auto motors, and move at a good speed.



Our first stop is one of the floating Islands of the Uros people. We've seen photos of this in National Geographic, but nothing can fully describe how they choose to live until you actually see it. On our way out to the islands (about a 45 minute trip) we saw several men in boats harvesting reeds.



We had to stop at a small floating entrance station to check-in and pay fees. We were pre-paid, but still had to stop to have our passes checked for our visit the islands. Most of the boats we saw here were the traditional ones made completely from reeds.



The dense roots that the totoro reeds growing in the lake develop will interweave to form a dense but buoyant natural mat called khili. For centuries, the Uros have cut the reeds in the lake and built islands upon the cork-like root mats of the reeds, which they cut away from the lake bottom in very large pieces around 6 x 6 feet square and about 1½ feet thick. As soon as they are cut away from the bottom they float to the surface. These reed mats are then piled on top of each other to a thickness of four to six feet, and the root sections are tied together and secured to the bottom with sticks and rope. They continue building sections and attaching them together until they have an island of the desired size. Voila you have a floating island. It's spongy under foot, but you don't feel insecure. Each step on an island sinks about 2-4" depending on the density of the reed mats underfoot. The reeds at the bottoms of the islands rot away fairly quickly, so new reeds are added to the top constantly, about every three months. Each island lasts about thirty years.



Huts are built on top, made of reeds of course with reed-thatched roofs. Most of their boats are made the "old-time" way, with reeds. Cooking is handled on top of large wet pieces of the root mass using a clay stove surround and clay cooking pots. Again, we don't ask about sewage disposal methods. The women wear the most beautiful dress, round straw hats, long pitch-black braids with wool pom-poms at the ends, bountiful full skirts and bare feet. The day we visited, they were enjoying digging ice out of the reed floor and eating it as it had

The first of the islands that we visit is small, about 4-5 homes and fairly non-commercial. There are about 250 islands. Twenty or so allow tourists to visit. The Uros understand that the tourism brings money to their islands so they have accepted it. They have an elementary school within the islands but children must attend high school in Puno. We would wonder how you can keep them on the islands after they have seen Puno, but then we've seen Puno and it might be better on the islands. Another reason to stay on the islands is that they pay no tax because they own no real property.

Most of the Indians still practice their traditional religion. You certainly don't see Catholic churches anywhere, but there are missionaries for the Mormons and 7th Day Adventists around. In the past, the government did nothing for the Uros, but now they supply the teachers for the schools and minimal medical assistance. Around 2,000 descendants of the original Uros were counted in the 1997 census, although only a few hundred still live on and maintain the islands; most have moved to the mainland. The Uro also bury their dead on the mainland in special cemeteries.

A young woman gives us a little talk (complete with posters) on how the islands and everything there are built of reeds and maintained and on life on the islands in general. Her name is Norga; we speak with her a bit (the Uros speak Aymara and Spanish) and she said she wanted to go on to college and be an accountant. Ann wanted to take out her check-book and send her right then. Instead she purchased some of her embroidery work to support her dreams of accountancy. The hut we entered to make the purchase was so poorly lighted that Ann had no idea what she bought, and didn't find out until she opened the bag back at the hotel. It turned out that everything looked fine and we have a pair of colorful sofa pillows and a wall hanging in Chicago that came from the Uros Islands in Lake Titicaca.

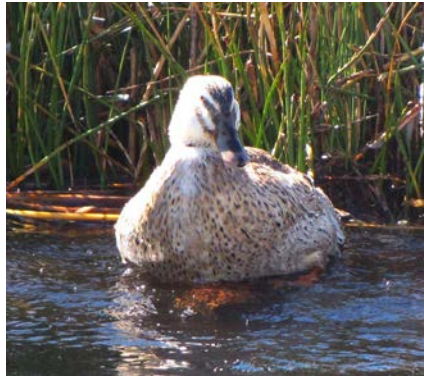


above: Communal cooking area



The Uros domesticate ducks (*right*) and Ibis (*far right*) both of which they use for eggs and meat.

Cats (*below*) provide rodent control.



And cormorants are sometimes used for fishing. They keep a ring around the cormorant's throat, large enough that they have no trouble breathing or swallowing small bits of food, but small enough that they can't swallow a whole fish, which is their normal way of eating. The fishermen take them out in their boats and when the cormorant brings back a fish he can't swallow it, he must "cough it up" for the fisherman. Then they get a few small pieces of fish that they are able to swallow as a reward. Must be frustrating for the bird, but the fishermen keep them well-fed and cared for. This method of cormorant fishing is a world-wide thing and is especially common in China and Southeast Asia.



They take surprisingly large fish. If the cormorant above wasn't "ringed" it could swallow that fish without any problem.

The second island was larger and had a small shop for "tourist stuff", a very small restaurant and even a post-office. Like typical tourists we got our passports stamped for "Uros Islands". Since they have a sort of sovereignty I suppose it was "legitimate". Cost us 1 Nuevo Sole (about 35 cents) each.

There are some encroachments of the modern world. Solar panels bring light to a few of the huts and we even saw a satellite dish here and there. Our bet would be that within 50-75 years, the Uros way of life will probably exist only in museums. That way of life is just too .

30 hard. But then they've existed there for over 3 millennia, so who knows

Then on to Isla Taquile, a “real” island (non-floating variety) with a population of about 3,000. Isla Taquile is huge hunk of rock about 5.5 km long and 1.5 km wide, just over 2 square miles. This is a 2 ½ hour trip since Taquile is a good way out from shore. We wish we had our Kindles with us. So we doze and think about how fortunate we are to be where we are right now.



As we approach the island we see agricultural terraces everywhere. We land at Puerto Salacancha, one of only 2 “ports” (really just a short concrete pier out into the lake and a refreshment stand) and started our climb to the town square. Just what we need is

another 1,500-2,000 feet of altitude to cope with. This is one of the highest altitudes we reach on the trip, about 14,000 feet. It takes us less than an hour to get to the top including several short breather stops, and we’re a little surprised it isn’t more difficult. We pass farms and farmhouses and fields for animals (mostly sheep) and crops.



Along the way to the top Manuel introduces us to muña, a tiny leafed bush that, when rubbed in the hands, produces a strong mentholated odor that is effective in dealing with altitude. Smelling it opens the nasal passages and you can take in more air. It seemed to work for us; we found breathing easier with an occasional sniff of our muña leaves as we walked up the path. Good doctors those Indians. Here, they inhale it and drink muña tea. Most of the locals say it is much more effective than the coca tea you hear so much about.





The immediate thing you notice is that men wear beautiful costumes: black billowy pants, beautiful woven cummerbunds, sometimes black bolero jackets and colorful knitted hats. Different hats signify marital status and community status. The women wear the beautiful skirts, layers of rather plain sweaters and wonderful big black shawls which do multiple duty for warmth, market baskets, cradles, sun shades, etc. Everyone, men, women and children, wears colorful attire.



After the Spanish conquest native dress was forbidden and the natives were forced to dress in the manner of Spanish peasants, but after liberation they began to add back native elements and now the attire here is a combination of the two. It's not a show for the tourists, but there are few tourists here, it is simply the everyday way of dressing now.

The people, known as Taquileños are working all the time. As the men almost run up and down the steep paths, they are either knitting, or if not knitting, carrying something. No one seems to be in a hurry, but no one is "doing nothing" either. Obviously an industrious people. Knitting is exclusively performed by males, starting at age eight. Using five needles, about size 2, they are making hats, hats, hats, of amazingly intricate patterns. The women exclusively make yarn and they are always spinning, from the raw wool to the skein and from there to the fine wool which the men knit. The women also do the weaving. Since this is the dry season the fields are fallow and there is time for the spinning, weaving and knitting. Soon, they will begin to plow the fields and craft work will be put away for the season. Taquile is especially known for its handicraft tradition which is regarded as among the highest quality handicrafts not only in Peru but in the world. "Taquile and Its Textile Art" were honored by being proclaimed "Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity" by UNESCO.



This island has been inhabited for at least a couple of millennia, ancient terraces cover the landscape directing and conserving the water in the rainy season. And they practice the *Waru Waru* agricultural technique developed by pre Hispanic peoples in the Andes region of South America, from Colombia to Bolivia. It is dated around 300 BCE. *Waru Waru* consists

This prevents damage due to soil erosion and to distributes the water evenly among fields and beds. The water between the beds also absorbs heat during the day and radiates it at night and has the benefit of mitigating frost damage to crops.



At the top of Isla Taquille is a small village (just named “Taquille” according to Manuel) with a square, government buildings, a couple of shops and a couple of restaurants, guys "hanging out", kids playing soccer in the square and working on kites. Apparently Peruvians love kites.



And these folks are waiting for the restaurant to open. I wonder if they're as hungry as we are?

We have lunch in one of the restaurants called Inka Taquille. Some nice fresh trout with papas and arroz. Trout is about the only fish available away from the ocean; they even make ceviché with trout inland. and quinoa soup to start . . . we had some at the hotel yesterday and we will find it omnipresent throughout the rest of our trip. Fortunately both of us find it very tasty. Peruvians, including Indians, don't cook spicy food. They use a mixture of onions and peppers called rocotto (very hot and best used sparingly) as a spicy condiment to add seasoning as desired.

The Indians here are traditionally quiet and “closed” to outsiders. It was only within the last 20 years that they allowed tourists to come at all. They are friendly, they simply prefer to keep to themselves and their traditional way of life. Manuel has wisely established good relationships with some of the people and he had friendly chats with several along the way and in the village. They have their own primary school and a high school. Solar panels bring electricity and you see cable TV dishes here and there.

This life here on Taquille seems to be so much better (in our “American” judgment, of course) than the floating Uros Islands and perhaps it would be hard to leave. Again, we did not ask about sewage disposal, the entire island is almost all rock, so it can’t be easy (but then there IS the lake, and it IS downhill from everything).

After lunch we shop; Ed buys some postcards to send later, Ann buys a couple of knit items for herself and some gloves for her friend Sheryle. Then it’s time to head back so we start walking down taking a different path to the other port on the island, where our boat has gone to meet us. Many of these stone arches are located along the paths. Manuel says the purpose is unclear and most of the residents just consider them “good luck” to pass through. You might note the metal rod along the inside hung with muña and other herbs.



And more terraces line the hills on this side of the island. About 90% of usable land on the island is terraced, some going back over a millennium. We guess we’ve done about 2 ½ to 3 miles of walking up and down the paths overall. And here we finally arrive at the “port” of Puerto Tachuno.



As we motor 2 ½ hours back to Puno, it is interesting to study the communities along the lake. We’re not really close to the shore, but all the buildings appeared to be completed, neatness abounds, though we were not close enough to see how much trash there might have been. Certainly along the paths we walked on Isla Taquille and in the village at the top, there was absolutely NONE. In general Peru seems to have a problem with trash in all the rural areas, Taquille being a pleasant exception.



We are glad to see our luxurious hotel and know that those warm, fleecy comforters await us. We pass near it on our way to the port in Puno, but it will still be a 20-minute drive to get there after we get off the boat and back to the parking area.

Although our meal in the hotel restaurant last night was delicious, we are just not that hungry tonight (a large, late lunch on Taquille) so for dinner we purchase a bag of chips near the Puno docks for our dinner.



In the evening we read our books and enjoy our last sunset over Titicaca.

Ann hoped that the few pieces of underwear we washed had actually dried in the dry air of the Altiplano . . . and they had.

We're up tomorrow at 5:00 am for a 6:30 am pick-up to meet the bus for our all-day sightseeing trip to Cusco.