

started driving out towards the south, the skies turned to a deep, deep shade of blue.

TO THE DUNES

Huacachina is a village still stuck in the 'Summer of Love' movement that swept the world half a century ago. Its centre is a lagoon filled with olive green water, ringed with palm trees and bars and cafes blasting Bob Marley, the Beatles and the Eagles, and surrounded by gigantic and towering sand dunes.

It is about 340km south of Lima. Some people trudge up the dunes, which takes grit and determination because it is a 'one step forward, two steps back' kind of process. And for people like me, there are dune buggies. Powered with old, rudimentary carburetted engines with huge air filters, and fitted with a roll cage and five-point harnesses for occupants – it is a thrilling way to explore the dunes. The drivers are experts who take screaming passengers on a joyride up and down almost vertical slopes.

The road, almost all the way to Huacachina, was a four-laned delight and a part of the Carretera Panamericana Sur 1S along the Pacific Ocean. The speed limit is 90kph but the cops seemed to be lenient to about 110kph.

It was after the village that the 1S snaked away inland, away from the coastal plateau and towards low hills. The road now became a two-laner and the quality of tarmac was simply fantastic. Every bit was marked with yellow dividing lines, either solid or broken, to indicate overtaking possibilities. In fact, this is what I noticed about every road that I drove on; no matter how remote, they were well-marked, satin-smooth and accurately signposted.

ART IN THE DESERT

It was just 146km to Nazca, and at about 75km, I was flagged down by the highway patrol that drives Toyota trucks emblazoned with 'POLICIA' on the sides and a mirror image of the same on the bonnet. I had forgotten to switch on my headlights, and that is required by law when driving on highways in Peru. The cop didn't speak English and I only spoke a smattering of Spanish that consisted of 'hasta mañana', 'buena noches', 'gracias', 'por favor' and 'chiquitita' – words that I used liberally with a lot of flair and handshaking. After checking my passport and licence, and the car's documents, officer Yepres tried to mime →



The Sacred Valley between Cusco and Urubamba is peppered with ruins and ancient sites.

LAND OF LEGENDS

A road trip is the best way to explore Peru's vibrant culture and rich history, as Rishad Saam Mehta learns from behind the wheel of a Nissan Versa.

PHOTOGRAPHY RISHAD SAAM MEHTA

Lying face down over a sandy precipice on a well-waxed sandboard, I wondered if I should bail out. The slope of this gigantic dune was angled at more than 60 degrees and dropped about 80 feet. After that, there was a flat run-off area of about 15 feet before the dune fell away again and I couldn't even see that bit.

I lifted my torso and craned my neck to peer at that second slope and that unsettled the board; I tipped over the edge and zipped down both the

slopes in about 20sec, grains of fine sand hitting my face and adrenaline soaring...

I was in Huacachina (pronounced Wah-ca-cheena), the first stop on my road trip around Peru.

ARMCHAIR ADVICE

Every online forum I went through and every guide book I referred to advised against driving in Peru. But air-hopping across a country isn't really my idea of travel and so, to gain some perspective, I checked what the sages of

cyberspace had to say about driving in India. The general consensus was that it was akin to having a death wish. So, using that as a gauge, I figured I would be just fine behind the wheel in Peru. And after 3,200km around this country in 21 days let me tell you that I wouldn't do it any other way and you shouldn't either.

When I landed in Lima in the first week of June, I walked out to a sky rendered grey thanks to heavy clouds that hung low, ominous with the threat of rain. But as the pictures will tell you, the dull skies were largely restricted to Lima. Once I



via Carr. Panamericana Sur/Route 1S



Huacachina is a little oasis popular with backpackers and it seems stuck in the hippie era. Sandboarding is the thrill here. ▲



▼ Nazca Lines shot from a Cessna. These enigmatic designs in the desert are over 1,000 years old.



The road from Nazca to Arequipa is an absolute driving delight with sparse traffic and scenic views.

← that I would be charged a fine for not having my headlights on, but I kept grinning like an uncomprehending idiot and kept trying to shake his hand. Finally, he waved me on with a mix of amusement and exasperation.

Nazca, a dusty town in the desert is firmly stamped onto Peru's tourist trail thanks to the mysterious Nazca Lines – an enigma whose origins and purpose have been lost in the mists of time. Declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1994, the Nazca Lines are ancient geometric lines and animal geoglyphs etched out by a pre-Inca civilisation between the fifth and seventh century AD. Theories abound about how and why they were etched out but these are speculations at best. In fact, they were first documented less than a century ago. They can be only truly appreciated from the sky and that further adds to the mystery of their creation. I stopped at Mirador, about 50km short of Nazca, where some enterprising locals have constructed a 50-foot tower. Standing at the bottom and looking out at the desert, it seemed plain. But when I climbed to the top and looked down, I saw three of the Nazca geoglyphs – the tree, the hands and the lizard. The Panamericana Sur, in fact, cuts right across the tail of the lizard showing that the road was built before the lines were discovered.

Later that afternoon, I signed up for a 30min flight over the Nazca Lines (USD 70). I am not very fond of small planes and this Cessna had to bank a lot to give passengers on both sides views of the lines, but I am glad I did that flight. It is mind-boggling how those ancients envisioned and created those drawings in such a way that they are still discernible a thousand years on.

SMALL TOWN, BIG HEART

It was from Nazca that I started to firmly believe that I was right in disregarding the advice about driving in Peru. The high road from Nazca to Arequipa is nine hours of unrelenting



You can spot these guys pulling funny faces at you.

visual delight. The road itself is a satin-smooth ribbon of black as it heads back out towards the coast and goes along the wild Pacific. The traffic is sparse at best and very well behaved. At a town called Camana, 393km from Nazca, the road turns inland again for the last 180km and goes through a series of hills and past gigantic dunes. Finally, during the last 60km or so, the three dormant volcanoes that stand as sentinels around Arequipa – Chachani, Misti and Pichu Pichu – came into view and were constant companions right until the city. If lines come to mind when you think of Nazca, then it has to be food when it comes to Arequipa. For the two days I spent walking around Arequipa – also called the White City thanks to the local white volcanic sillar rock that has been used for most of its Baroque architecture – I had my fill of authentic Peruvian food at its many picanterias (small local eateries much like our *khanalayas*). Peruvians love their pork, beef, lamb and fish. Besides that, maize, potatoes and peppers add colour and flavour to their food.



You'll also see that the city's little lanes are stuffed with bars serving refreshing and varied Peruvian craft beer, and pizzerias with wood-fired ovens. But if you want the best views over some delicious *Lomo saltado* – a popular, traditional →

DRIVING IN PERU

RENTAL CARS CAN be booked online in advance and both Budget and Avis have a large presence in Peru.

The Nissan Versa cost me USD 2,200 for 21 days. This included unlimited kilometres and zero liability insurance, which meant that even if I totalled the car, I wouldn't be liable for any damage.

But rather than a Versa, I should have hired either a Kia Sportage or a Hyundai Santa Fe or a Toyota RAV4, as they would have enhanced my drives.

The price of petrol ranges from 10.4 to 14.5 PEN (Peruvian Soles) per gallon – this equates to Rs 56-80 per litre. Tollbooths are plenty here and that's why the quality of roads is so great. The toll ranges from 3.5 to 7.5 PEN. And like in India, a tyre on a pole indicates puncture repair shops.

You need to have your headlights switched on while driving, even during daylight hours. The cops can charge up to USD 300 for speeding and can apply stiff fines for overtaking when there is a solid dividing line. Watch out for llamas, alpacas and vicunas. They often run across the road.



The view of the ruins at Machu Picchu from Puerta del Sol. This view makes the nine-mile (14.5km) trek to this citadel worth the effort.



My best drive in Peru was the road from Cusco to Abancay that went over the Andes.

← Peruvian stir-fry dish that typically combines marinated strips of sirloin with onions, tomatoes, french fries served with rice – then head to the terrace of Hotel Katari that overlooks the Plaza de Armas. It looks out to the Basilica Catedral de Arequipa with the volcanoes towering behind it.



without visiting Machu Picchu, but you can't drive there. To preserve the environment the only way to get to Aguas Calientes, the base for Machu Picchu, is to take the train from Cusco or from Ollantaytambo. Fortunately for me, I spent one night at the fabulously located Hotel Inkaterra Hacienda in Urubamba, which is 40km from Ollantaytambo Railway Station.

THE LAND OF THE INCAS

My hired car was a Nissan Versa that has a reputation for being one of the cheapest in the American continent. The girls at the Budget counter in Lima, where I rented the car from, had suggested the manual transmission version because it would be better suited for the high mountain passes that I would have to drive over. I realised the wisdom of this because the 1.6-litre engine lost some of its grunt at about 12,000ft and overtaking on short straights between hairpins had to be a precisely planned procedure in the right gear and between 4,500rpm and 6,000rpm for optimum torque and horsepower, respectively. But to be fair, even with so much gunning of the engine, it rarely ever returned less than 16kpl on 95-octane gasoline. When I returned it to Lima, however, the brakes had faded away considerably, thanks to all the sharp descents.

Obviously, I couldn't come away from Peru

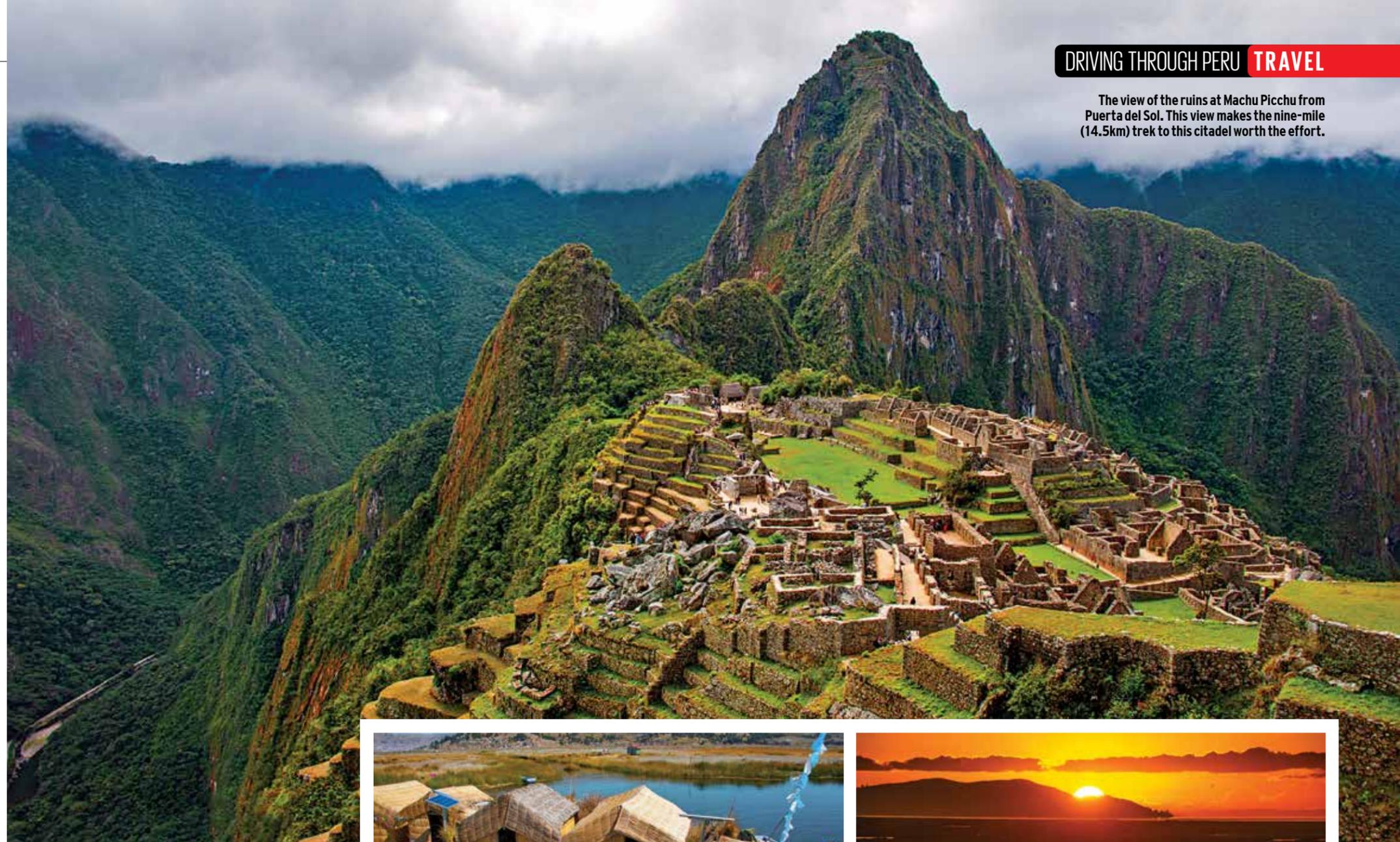
The road going from Cusco to Urubamba is also a delight and it goes through the Sacred Valley. The region was the nerve centre of power during the Inca era and it's still got a palpable sense of the vibrancy of an era and culture now gone.

The train drops you all the way to Aguas Calientes, from where a 25min bus ride brings you to the base of Machu Picchu. But, honestly, this was a ruination of the experience; there were just too many people and tour groups that took away the pristine, tranquil nature of the place.

For a real sense of 'arriving', I hopped off the train at the 104km milestone and walked nine miles from 7,000ft to 9,200ft on narrow cliff edge paths above the clouds to arrive at the Gate of the Sun. From here, I could see Machu Picchu in the valley below, in all its grandeur. It's a tiring, steady uphill grind with some killer stone staircases, but is certainly worth it.



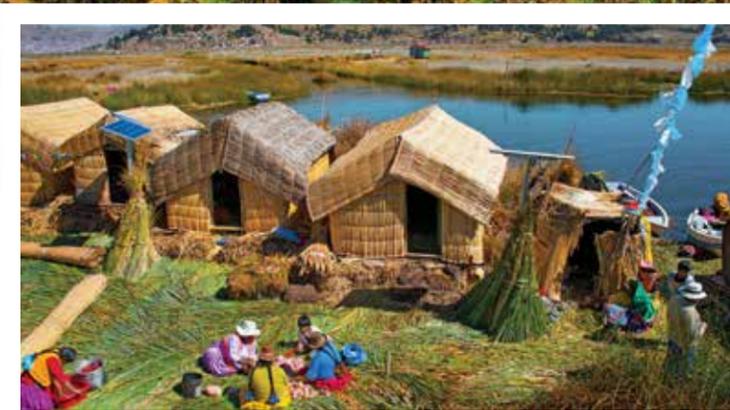
Sawdust frescoes made by school children around Plaza de Armas in Arequipa.



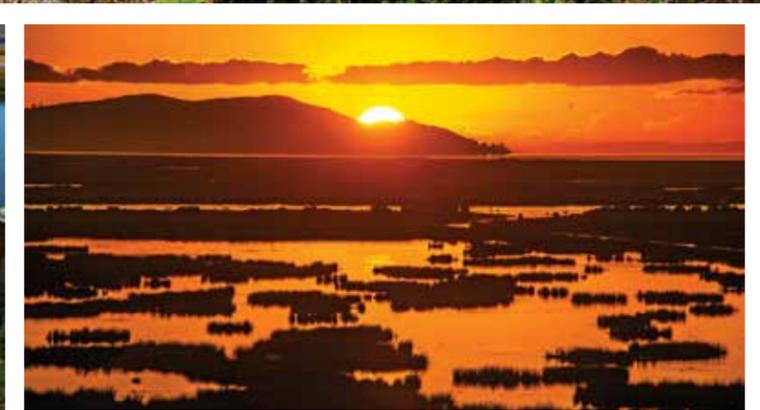
INFORMATION

AS OF MARCH 27, 2017, Peru has eased visa requirements for Indian nationals. Now holders of an ordinary passport are exempted from the requirement of a visa, if they hold a visa with a validity of minimum six months from any one or more of the following countries: Unites States of America, Canada, United Kingdom, Australia or any Schengen space country or is a permanent resident in any of these countries.

USD and Euros can be exchanged easily. However, exchange bureaus will not accept old USD notes or notes that have scribbles on them. If you're looking for top-notch places to stay during your trip to Peru you can't go wrong with the following hotel chains: Casa Andina, Inkaterra and Libertador.



Floating reed island of Uros on Lake Titicaca. The huts are made of reed too.



Yet another beautiful day in Puno, with the sun rising over Lake Titicaca.

As a reward for doing this trek, you can take the special dinner service train that Inca Rail runs in the evening. It features plush leather seats and a three-course, sit-down dinner. The day I was riding it there was a technical problem and the 90min journey from Aguas Calientes to Ollantaytambo stretched to over 2.5 hours. But the gracious staff threw open the bar carriage and the in-house band started belting out Bossa Nova hits, and soon the frosty formal atmosphere of the fine-dining train dissolved into that of a rambunctious nightclub on rails.

After Cusco, I had to start the long slog back to Lima, 1,100km away. The shortest route was the one through Abancay, one that I had been asked to avoid. But locals told me that the road had been recently reconstructed and was now quite all right. That was an understatement at best; the road was so much better than just all right. The high road from Abancay to Nazca stands out as a mind-boggling drive with hardly any traffic, grazing llamas, alpacas and vicunas, and great sections of switchbacks going downhill – where I could slide the little Nissan around corners –

and snow-capped views, as I crested a number of Andean mountain passes.

After having spent three weeks behind the wheel in Peru, and coming across potholes and bad sections that I can count on the fingers of one hand, friendly policemen proud that a foreigner is doing a road trip in their country and views that kept making me stop to photograph, I am still scratching my head trying to figure out why the internet says that driving in Peru is not advisable? It is a country best explored by road. **AI**