



**All aboard:** (above) reed canoes used by the villagers at Uros.

**All together now:** (left) bad neighbours in the reed village can be just cut adrift.

**Fashionista:** (far left) on the island Tequile.

**Tricky:** (bottom right) cooking in a reed village takes lots of care.

## THE DEAL

➔ **Getting there:** LAN Chile offers connecting flights between Melbourne and Lima starting from \$2850. Ph: 1800 221 572.

➔ **Touring:** GAP Adventures has itineraries including Lake Titicaca. Prices start from as little as \$1705 for a 12-day tour. Ph: 1300 796 618 or visit [www.gapadventures.com](http://www.gapadventures.com)

➔ **More information:** Lonely Planet's guide to Peru has a dedicated section to assist independent travellers visiting Lake Titicaca. [www.lonelyplanet.com](http://www.lonelyplanet.com)



# Slightly ga-ga on Titicaca

**Ewen Bell finds himself distinctly light-headed on a visit to Peru's highest-altitude lake, Titicaca**

**V**ISITING the Peruvian shores of Lake Titicaca is not a wildlife adventure. For a start, nearly everything that moves has become a part of the local diet.

And as you journey out into the unknown depths by boat, the only thing you can see are weeds, reeds and then lots of water.

Laka Titicaca straddles the border between Peru and Bolivia.

The 170km-long, high-altitude lake is South America's largest.

The real stars of the lake are the handful of inhabited islands, including the floating villages of Uros.

How do you float a village on a freshwater lake? Simply collect slabs of water reeds, stitch them together to form large floating platforms, then put down another layer of reed-stalks to provide a squishy but insulated foundation.

Homes can then be built for each family on the island, once again by binding reeds together with rope.

The usefulness of Lake Titicaca's aquatic plants seems boundless.

Not only are the huts and the islands themselves made from reeds, but even canoes are also made from elaborate bundles tied together and left to dry in the sun before being set afloat.

There is healthy competition between the families to build the most ostentatious reed canoe. The present showboat of Uros

is a three-hulled model, with lower and upper viewing decks for the enjoyment of passengers being ferried from one island to another.

Life on the reeds is somewhat cosy, with families living close to their neighbours.

When hut-to-hut tensions reach melting point, the solution is to simply cut the floating island in half and let the feuding families head off in different directions.

Today there are more than 40 floating islands in the Uros community, most of which happily accept visits from passing tourists, hoping to sell a few handicrafts.

Trinkets and toys fashioned from small grasses and reeds are the main offering, but a healthy collection of mainland ceramics and textiles is also on display.

Guests are greeted with big smiles and a hot snack.

Baking bread takes on a new twist when you live on a floating island.

First you have to soak the reed matting with water to prevent fire.

Cooking is managed with a small clay stove, fuelled with dry reed stalks.

Local bread is made not from wheat but from a starchy powder prepared from fleshy reed-stems harvested deep below.

Man cannot live on reeds alone, so the floating families maintain enclosures for fish, chickens and guinea pigs.

The children of Uros love tending to



**Veteran:** an old man of Tequile.



**Reed art:** trinkets include boat people.

their guinea pigs and keeping them happy, but only because one day these little bundles of muscle will be served on top of rice and potatoes.

Not everyone on Lake Titicaca lives on floating bundles of reed.

The islands of Amantani and Tequile are inhabited by colourfully dressed Andean people who open their homes to accommodate western visitors.

It's a great way to experience Andean life, though every host family is asked to avoid serving guinea pig to their guests.

Before I can drop my bags and collapse on the bed, my host family wants to walk me back down the hill to join the local children for a game of soccer.

The idea of running around chasing genetically superior youngsters is terrifying, but my rent-a-mum just won't take no for an answer.

While I further torture my lungs on the soccer pitch, our host mothers gather in a group and continue their relentless spinning of alpaca wool.

The women carry around small bags of dyed fibres, continuously working while walking and talking.

I wonder if they have enough yarn to knit me an emergency stretcher and get me off the pitch.

That night we share a home-cooked meal at the farmhouse and I eat my soup and stew in near darkness.

Only a single candle provides light for dining, but I am pleased to finish the meal without having encountered any bones of small creatures.

At first light, it is time to head back down the hill to catch my boat back to civilisation.

My host mother gives a little wave and goes straight back to spinning her wool.

The boat ride to Puno, the main city on Lake Titicaca, takes us back through the reeds.

I wonder which life is more arduous: climbing up and down the rocky slopes of a barren island, or floating on a bed of reeds trying to catch fish all day.



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