

Destination Unknown

A surprise trip to **Lima** is designed to provide a window into the soul of our Print Editor-in-Chief as much as the place itself

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I bob up and down on the whipped, steely sea, clutching on to the side of a small fishing boat. In front of me a fisherwoman casts her colossal net from an even tinier vessel, drifting dangerously close to the craggy rocks along the shoreline where the water flings itself into desperate extinction. Suddenly she reaches inside her waders, pulls out a wooden flute and begins playing. As the piping floats along the breeze towards me, the effect is so bizarre, so eerie, that I feel more like the protagonist of a Freudian psychological vignette than your typical traveller.

Much of my time in Lima shares these smudged edges of a dream, smoothed and softened into a state of the surreal under the lick of a fog-shrouded sky. This impression is engendered not only by the chaos and magic of the city, but also by the fact that I had delivered myself into the hands of others to shape my journey and had no choice but to be carried along, much like a fishing boat in the flinty, serrated waves.

The dream-weavers were Brown + Hudson, an experientially minded travel company that specialises in crafting itineraries with a jolt of the unexpected. I had volunteered to embark on its “Journey with No Destination”, a concept engineered to take the emphasis off the “where” of travel and instead focus on the “why”. In our age of information, where the average holiday is precluded by a panicked scramble through an endless scroll of tweets, Instagram posts and online guides, often resulting in a copy-and-paste assemblage of recommendations, Brown + Hudson reframes this approach by asking travellers to complete an in-depth questionnaire probing their motivations, personality traits and desires. Their answers are analysed by a “travel psychologist” to create an individual profile, which is then used as the basis to design a trip centred on personal transformation and growth, equal parts adventure and therapy.

It's in this spirit that I find myself three gin and tonics down and attempting to grapple with anxiety-inducing questions ranging from “what do you find easy?” (mixing the perfect negroni, filling out online dating profiles, pulling off clown-like clothing) to the frankly existential “if you were at the end of your life, what would you regret not having achieved?” (cue blind staring into the limits of my soul). Eventually I hit send and forget about the whole thing until a few weeks later when I receive my profile, which tells me that my two strongest traits are openness and novelty seeking and that my experience will encourage both self-reflection and boundary pushing. My destination remains a mystery, save for a biscuit-crumble trail of carefully coded clues that ping into my inbox over the intervening weeks and days alongside a basic packing list. ▶▶

I'm still largely in the dark as I climb into the car that has been sent to my flat and am handed a box revealing that my end point will be the Peruvian capital of Lima, chosen to enable me to expand my view of the world and my position in it, make authentic connections with people (and especially strong, brave women), and indulge my appreciation for art, food and fashion. It's a pretty on-the-nose assessment of my travel leanings, so having spent the previous few days oscillating between fascination and fear at the prospect of completely rescinding control, I decide to exhale into an experience that will take me through different facets of my personality and (although I don't know it yet) bring me into contact with a cast of curious characters including hip-hop dancing ballerinas, equestrian artists and of course, a flute-playing fisherwoman.

After landing late in the evening, as I'm whisked through the traffic-choked arteries leading into central Lima I'm given the next day's outline in a ritual that will be repeated each night, usually accompanied by a cocktail. I review it with a chilcano (pisco and ginger ale) in hand from my private rooftop terrace at Villa Barranco, a restored 1920s colonial house in the bohemian district of Barranco. Previously where wealthy Limeños built their holiday homes, the neighbourhood fell into disrepair over the years and artists moved into its pretty, brightly coloured buildings in shades of peach and Yves Klein-blue. Today the majority of the city's most fashionable hotels, boutiques and galleries are clustered within its confines.

Amid the salt-smell of the surf and the ghostly outline of spindly palms against the sea, I discover that tomorrow's activities will focus on "giving back", in accordance with my determined preference for orienting my travels towards others rather than myself. Our first stop will be visiting the D1 Cultural Association, a non-profit organisation run by ex-ballerina Vania Masias, a Limeña who turned her back on her dream of participating in the Cirque du Soleil in order to teach local children street dance and leadership skills. There's a kick, though – to challenge my self-professed fear of public speaking, I've been asked to give a few "inspirational words of encouragement" to the students.

Armed with a few pro tips on a printed sheet, we arrive the next morning at D1's headquarters, where a few dancers are warming up. Masias tells me how, after studying in London, she returned to Lima at the age of 25 for a holiday and ended up never going back, having been struck by the sight of young men performing in the streets. She converted her family home into studios, brought over choreographers from New York City and slowly won the trust of her students, many of whom had left school before 15 and risked a life of violence. Today more than 100,000 children have been through the programme and 65 per cent of its graduates are entrepreneurs. Masias is also working with the government to implement her methodology in schools across Peru, developing not only dance, but also emotional skills and the value of working together. "In order to save the world, we need to build community," she tells me. ▶▶





LUCUMA IN HIS STUDIO



MONUMENTAL CALLAO

It's an impressive manifesto that leaves me feeling rather sheepish about any words of wisdom I might have to impart. Regardless, I muster my bravado and tell the assembled circle of students about my admiration for their tenacity and how as an editor, I appreciate the strengths and struggles of creating something in chorus. Before we leave, I'm made to join in with their warm-up, the combination of ambassadorial duties and robotic white-girl dancing meaning that for the first (and hopefully last) time in my life, I feel a true sense of kinship with Theresa May.

Boundaries suitably teased, we move on to lunch at the taverna-inspired Isolina where, firmly back in my comfort zone, I devour bonito with aji chilli pepper and my first ceviche, a puddle of pale slices of white fish, chunks of sweet potato, deep-fried octopus and huge, crunchy corn kernels. We then drive out of the refined ranks of Barranco towards Callao, the historic port barrio enveloped by Lima's urban sprawl. Still a no-go for many wealthy Limeños, this part of the city is a stark contrast to the moneyed mansions of Barranco and glass high-rises of Miraflores. The tide of Peru's fast-growing economy has yet to wash over this dishevelled, dangerous district, whose docks are allegedly a centre for cocaine exportation and where the streets are unsafe at night.

However, it's also home to Fugaz, a regeneration project aiming to transform the neighbourhood of Monumental into an arts hub and provide opportunities outside of theft and trafficking. Representative Angie Pelosi walks me around the six-storey Casa Ronald, a formerly abandoned colonial building with marble columns and stained-glass ceilings that now houses galleries, artists' studios and shops, many of which are run by locals. I gawp at Jesús Pedraglio Belmont's gargantuan hanging loops of fabric, surrealist tableaux of Amazonian symbols by the indigenous artist Brus Rubio, and psychedelic "chicha" artworks by Lucuma, a former convict who now paints neon pieces with a political edge. He tells me how his work is a criticism of the country's prison system and its corrupt politicians, before sneakily planting a moustachioed smacker on my neck as we pose for a picture.

The streets surrounding the casa are filled with open shop fronts and galleries, fluttering strings of flags and colourful murals, and Angie points out the seven-foot faces of the neighbourhood's residents on the walls that welcome people in, the work of muralist El Decertor. They're a fitting symbol of how the project is bringing pride and fostering community in a formerly unloved locale.

The evening is designed to appeal more to my professed epicurean instincts with a tasting menu at Kjolle, the new venture by top chef Pía León (that's the "strong women" box ticked, then). She's the wife of Virgilio Martínez Véliz, whose iconic Central is at the head of gastro-buffs' bucket lists worldwide. While their restaurants share a building and a focus on Peruvian ingredients, León's aims for a more relaxed approach. We make our way through sea bass with razor clams so fresh they twitch on the plate in their blackberry-bright bath, a tender curl of squid that comes in an Alexander McQueen-esque explosion of black and yellow powder, and tubers of yucca, olluco and potato that arrive as a fanfare of butterfly wings on an unctuously creamy base. ►►

The theme for my second day is “creative Lima”, another nod to my inclination for sensory delights. We start with a tour of the Amano Museum, dedicated to pre-Columbian textiles dating back as far as 5,000 years. Drawers are unlocked for us to peer at remarkably preserved garments made of cotton and feathers and marked with patterns of fish, cats and interlocking geometrics.

The fashion brand AYNI offers a more modern interpretation of Limeño style. With a combination of Scandinavian minimalism and Peruvian textiles that mirrors the heritage of its Danish and Peruvian founders, Laerke Skyum and Adriana Cachay Anardo, AYNI produces its own collections as well as sourcing fabrics and labelling for international brands including Balmain, Kenzo and Gudrun & Gudrun. As I chat to her in the brand’s headquarters, Anardo explains how it was important to find a way to empower their workers, leading them to start their own workshops to certify artisans in Lima, Cusco and the Andes. Each handmade garment is made using alpaca wool, pima cotton and natural dyes, while their creation starts a sustainable supply chain and helps to free the women workers from domestic abuse (of which Peru has the third-highest rate in the world) by affording them a living wage. “We want Peru to become a beacon for sustainable fashion in the same way that it now is for gastronomy,” Skyum adds.

Following another stellar lunch of tuna sashimi, causa (potato terrine) topped with langoustines and scallops drenched in parmesan and lemon at El Mercado, we shift from fashion to art with a visit to Galería 80m2 Livia Benavides. In its unconventional setting of a whitewashed Barranco home, I’m introduced to the work of Peruvian artists including the slick acrylic cut-outs of couple Gilda Mantilla and Raimond Chaves, political propaganda art of Sergio Zevallos and neons by Teresa Burga, a renowned multimedia artist in her 80s. At Artesanías Las Pallas, an Aladdin’s cave of Peruvian artisanal artefacts run by Scottish expat Mari Solari, she tells me how she sources folk art from her expeditions into the Andean mountains and Amazonian jungle while taking me on a whirlwind tour of her trove of exquisitely carved wooden toys, traditional weavings and sacred objects, including amulets and altarpieces. We return to our second lodging, Hotel B, an appropriately art-centric converted Belle Epoque mansion, where I’m delivered the next day’s activities alongside a flaming rum cocktail that I sip in my roll-top bathtub.

Like many South American cities I’ve visited, Lima has a fragmentary, chaotic temperament that lends it an unworldly air – not for nothing is it a running joke among the continent’s inhabitants that writers such as Gabriel García Márquez and Peru’s own Mario Vargas Llosa are named “magical realists” simply for writing about life as it is. A desert swathed for much of the year by an ominous grey mist locally known as the “donkey’s belly” in which giant buzzards swim like fish, it is a place where extremities thrive (dry and wet, rich and poor, ancient and modern) and storybook-like characters are likely to emerge from the murk at a moment’s notice. Nowhere is this more clearly underlined than when I find myself speeding past tumbledown towns and swamps filled with wild guinea pigs en route to the fishing village of Pucusana. ▶▶





HISTORICAL CENTRE



PUCUSANA



HACIENDA SANTA ROSA

A far cry from the tourist trail, this ramshackle resort on the city's outskirts is also a working market where fishermen draw up in their Lego-coloured boats to barter with buyers amid a frenzy of sloshing buckets of squid and rainbow stacks of crates. We're here to meet Karin Abensur, the CEO of a sustainable seafood company that aims to improve the lives of artisanal fishermen by paying them a fair price, as well as providing a sustainable income to local women by giving them employment filleting the fish, which is then sold to Lima's top restaurants. Abensur is a formidable force with a filthy laugh, a wicked sense of humour and a fierce passion for Peruvian artisanship that manifests not only in her commitment to traditional fishing, but also to the Peruvian flute. It's this quirky combination that leads to an impromptu performance amid the waves before we're treated to an encore of ceviche made fresh on her boat, the sea breeze the "extra ingredient" that gives it its piquancy.

As if to further underscore the contrasts of Limeño life we then drop into Hacienda Santa Rosa, a tangerine-tinted Republican-style mansion that is the home of artist Carmen Reátegui. Dressed in elegant traditional costume, Reátegui gives us a tightly choreographed performance atop one of her prize-winning horses before showing us the stables she has converted into studios and that are filled with her work, which belies her gentle exterior with its dark, politically charged beauty. We round the day off with sushi and pisco at Ayahuasca, a sprawling network of low-lit bars and lounges in a converted Barranco building, before watching a raucous hen party ferociously salsa its way across the dance floor in a Cuban bar.

In a final attempt to challenge my limits, a para-triking session above Lima's coastline is planned for our last morning – however, the press of the fog means we have to cancel (admittedly, somewhat to my relief) and instead spend the hours wandering the streets of the historical centre, where a religious procession trails incense and confetti across the cobbles. It's a more conventional mode of exploration that reminds me just how much I've managed to penetrate Lima's walls over the past few days. I've always believed that people give you the best insight into the character of a place, but now I also realise that the theatrical cast assembled to tell me the story of their city has also told me something about myself and my individual way of seeing the world. Perhaps a psychological vignette was the right comparison all along.

THE LOWDOWN

Brown + Hudson craft exquisitely bespoke travel experiences for discerning clients in every corner of the globe, including the unique Journeys with No Destination. Prices start at around £1,600 per person per night, depending on location and requirements.

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