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how to spend it travel edition





THE SMOOTH GUIDE | THE LONG LUXURIOUS WEEKEND

lima

It's an architectural hybrid, post-colonial capital with a capricious climate and, these days, arguably home to the Americas' most electric culinary scene, says **James Henderson**

Peruvians love to swap stories about food," says Oscar Velarde, an informal godfather of the country's cuisine, in the bar of his Lima restaurant, La Gloria. "It might be a different method of cooking someone's seen, or" – this being Peru – "a new ingredient, a leaf or tuber that's never been used before."

It's an odd confluence of events that has brought Peruvian cuisine onto the world stage: a mix of easier politics (after a torrid 1980s with the Shining Path insurgency and economic catastrophe); a burgeoning middle class and their rebellious youth, who turned their backs on the established admiration for French cuisine and cast an unprejudiced eye on local food; the many influences – early Spaniards, African, Chinese and latterly Japanese; and, finally, the impeccable ingredients. Peru has 30 of the world's 32 distinct climates, from deep ocean to the high Andes and jungle to desert. With fantastic fish and, famously, 3,000 varieties of potato – and now, a direct nonstop flight from London on British Airways – there has never been a better time to get to grips with the food scene.

Appearances on arrival are deceiving, though. A quick first appraisal shows a

typically Latin city – all traffic, noise and shabby concrete buildings sprouting billboards. Unlike with many New World municipalities, the old colonial centre isn't Lima's beating heart. Instead, follow the coastal cliffs (impossible-looking alluvial agglomerates shrouded to keep them stable) to the southern suburbs – San Isidro, Miraflores, Barranco. This is where it's happening.

Still, it's worth tipping your hat to one of the first vice-regal cities in the New World, settled in 1535. Its colonial gridiron sits on the river Rimac (in which there are echoes of the city's name), and merits an hour or two of exploration. Start in the Plaza de Armas, with its ornate plateresque and neoclassical cathedral and its Presidential Palace. Walk down nearby Jirón Ucayali for the best examples of Lima's typical ornate wooden balconies; many are carved as intricately as a cathedral choir. Peek into interior courtyards, and definitely visit the Convento de Santo Domingo, whose arcades are embellished

with whole ranges of majolica tiles, some dating from the very early 1600s.

Architecturally, Lima is a confusion; earthquakes have seen to that. Venerable colonial and fussy republican stand hard by cleaner, art nouveau lines. The baroque Church of San Pedro remains, though – and its acres of gilt sing of the city's past wealth and glory. Inside, the nave builds to a crescendo of gold and light at the early-19th-century neoclassical main altar. On leaving the colonial district, stop in at the Lima Museum of Art (MALI), where the best representation of the

republican style is José Gil de Castro's *Mariano Alejo Alvarez and his Son*.

But all this footslogging and intellectual stimulus is delaying Lima's essential pleasure: the gastronomic steeplechase. Ceviche, a national dish of sorts, is properly served only at lunch – the fish, landed at dawn from the cold Humboldt current, shouldn't wait around – and Rafael Osterling's bright and buzzy El Mercado, set in an open-air dining room, serves a classic version (alongside its cousin, tiradito) – lemon sole in lime, garlic and white pepper that zings on the

tongue. Follow with other prettily presented "market" food: multilayered causa potato stacks with dots of spicy huancaina cheese sauce (from the Peruvian mountains), orange and yellow chillis or bright pink camarones – it's a riot of colour. Or, in Barranco, try Isolina, a taberna with superb home-cooked fare served in enamel bowls. Its pejerrey (silverside)

From top: the neoclassical cathedral in Plaza de Armas. The terrace at Hotel B



sandwich is a lovely combination of salt and sweet, crunch and soft.

After years of neglect, Barranco is transitioning from raffish to respectable. A seaside escape in the 1920s (Miraflores and San Isidro later filled in where once *estancias* and olive groves stretched towards the old city), it was an architectural playground for wealthy Limeños; there's wedding cake, art deco, mock Tudor, mock alpine. But with the rest of Lima being bulldozed and resurrected in glass and concrete, there is interest in its higgledy-piggledy charm.

In an unostentatious house inland you will find MATE, fashion photographer Mario Testino's gallery (he being from Lima). Permanent exhibitions feature muses Kate Moss and Madonna, and his striking *Alta Moda*, a colourful revival of traditional Peruvian portraiture. A whole room is devoted to Princess Diana.

Pre-Columbian Peruvian art is fascinating but daunting, so you'll need a guide. The Larco Museum has a mind-boggling range of ritual and funerary artefacts: mummy-bundles, gold headdresses and ancient erotica. Clay figurines reveal eternal human concerns – the underworld and surface world represented in jaguar fangs, a double snakehead and feathers – but there's nothing as haunting as the lifelike pottery representations of men about to be sacrificed. Animal motifs also appear in Nazca and Huari textiles at the Amano Museum, where exhibits of pre-Columbian weavings date back 3,200 years.

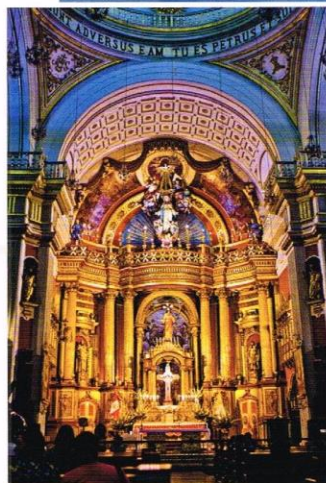
Peruvian art and craft to take home – some traditional, some more modern (appliqués depicting cars and buses) – can be found at Las Pallas, the shop/home of the delightful and eccentric Mari Solari, who sources all her artefacts direct. Andean art and design filters into modern Peruvian fashion too, which nowadays stretches well beyond ponchos and chullo hats with bobble tails. Try Ani Alvarez Calderón for striking eveningwear or, for a younger fashion house, Escudo in Barranco, where Giuliana and Chiara Macchiavello use Peruvian wool to create stylish and original work. Kuna offers standard but excellent quality jerseys and scarves of alpaca and the softest vicuña wool.

Of course, for centuries Peru has been famed for precious metals, particularly silver. Ilaria is the best-known jeweller, but her work can now be bought as far afield as Moscow; so try Argentinian film producer Ester Ventura, Peru-based since 1974, for dramatic decorative wear. For more delicate styles woven through with Peruvian themes, look for Lorena Pestana.

There's a handful of luxurious places to stay in Lima, of which the most desirable is Hotel B, in Barranco. Its structure, a pillared wedding cake of a restored family home, is deceptive – inside, it is sharp and stylish, with walls displaying art from around the continent and a very lively dining room and bar. Stay in one of the restored, larger rooms in the original house. The Country Club Lima offers more traditional comfort, with a neoclassical and Latin exterior, hardwood and gilt inside and



Clockwise from top: the pool at Belmond Miraflores Park. Amazonian beans, from Mado's Nikkei menu. The baroque Church of San Pedro



At Central, tasting menus are arranged by metres above sea level

clouded and almost chilly. It's another odd confluence, of the cold Humboldt current running up the coast and dry air spilling off the Andes, causing Lima's "polystyrene" sky – cloud cover at 500ft. But that climate is the source of Peru's extraordinary variety of produce. For the noisy, smelly, authentic experience of local food on sale, try Mercado Uno, or the more leisurely Sunday market in Calle Miguel Dasso in San Isidro, where you can come to know your quinoa from your kaniwa, kiwicha and avena.

And so to Lima's main event: dining out. It's an intense scene, bounding with energy and experimentation. Several of its top chefs started out working at

a panelled, almost English bar serving tea from 3pm. Its best Governor de Luxe suites have views of the nearby park and golf course, one of Lima's few stretches of green. The Belmond Miraflores Park, in a cliff-front high-rise, has some trouble outgrowing a previous incarnation (standard-shaped rooms), but it does well on service and comfort, and particularly on views. The top-floor Presidential suites have plunge pools overlooking the coast and Pacific Ocean.

You might wonder how a city just a few degrees off the equator is often

Velarde's La Gloria (he oversees the dining room at Hotel B), and have since branched out.

In another city you might cock an eyebrow at a menu divided by "elevations" and "ecosystems", but at Virgilio Martínez's Central it's entirely credible. The dining room is formal, dressed in a multiplicity of muted browns and mirrors, and it offers 12- and 17-course tasting menus arranged by metres above sea level, including shoreside sargassum (-5m) and high-mountain cushuro (a spherical cyanobacterium from Andean lakes, used in soups) from 4,100m. It's rarefied stuff, and superb. Astrid & Gastón, set in the tall-ceilinged rooms of a restored *estancia*, is still a flagship. There's a fantastic mix of international ideas executed with Peruvian ingredients.

Malabar, meanwhile, is a study in urban cool. Start in the bar – with one of the pisco cocktails – before repairing into the low-lit, curved dining room where the menu offers superb seasonal fare with fish, duck, guinea pig and rabbit.

But as Velarde noted, the swapping of stories about food goes on – and on. There's Mado, with its 15-course Nikkei menu using superb fish in a Peruvian-Japanese fusion (Nobu Matsuhisa famously lived and worked here); and amaZ, which has food inspired by the Amazon; and the penumbral lighting of Nos (by Central's Martínez), which offers casual fare in a very cool setting. Not so many years ago, the director of a cooking school was heard to say, "Peruvian food is for peasants." How things have changed. Osterling, who regularly feeds national celebrities and the great and good, takes a different view: "Food is what has united Peruvians." ♦

THE HIT LIST

WHERE TO STAY

Prices are for a double room with breakfast. **Belmond Miraflores Park**, Belmond, Malecón de la Reserva, Miraflores (+51-610 4000; www.belmond.com), from about £275. **Country Club Lima**, Calle Los Eucaliptos 590, San Isidro (+51-611 9001; www.hotelcountry.com), from £345. **Hotel B**, Sáenz Peña 204, Barranco (+51-206 0800; www.hotelb.pe), from £345.

RESTAURANTS

Prices are for three courses with half a bottle of wine. **amaZ**, Av La Paz 1,079, Miraflores (+51-221 9393), about £35. **Astrid & Gastón**, Av Paz Soldán 290, San

Isidro (+51-442 2775), about £45 with a glass of wine. **Central**, Santa Isabel 376, Miraflores (+51-242 8515), about £67 for 12 courses, £84 for 17 courses, with paired wines. **El Mercado**, Hipólito Unanue 203, Miraflores (+51-221 1322), lunch about £30. **Isolina**, Av San Martín Prolongación 101, Barranco (+51-247 5075), lunch about £25. **La Gloria**, Calle Atahualpa 201, Miraflores (+51-445 5705), about £70. **Mado**, Calle San Martín 399, Miraflores (+51-446 2512), about £84, or about £120 with paired wines. **Malabar**, Calle Camino Real 101, San Isidro (+51-444 5211), about £35.

MUSEUMS AND SHOPS

Amamo Pre-Columbian Textile Museum, Calle Retiro 160, Miraflores (+51-441 2909; www.museoamamo.org). **Ani Alvarez Calderón**, by appt only, Jirón Andahuaylas (+51-364 5565). **Escudo**, Juan Fanning 108, Barranco (+51-512 3530). **Ester Ventura**, Malecón Almirante Grau 1157, Chorrillos (+51-251 3952). **Ilaria**, Av Dos de Mayo 308, San Isidro (+51-256 7504). **Kuna**, Av Jorge Basadre Grohmann 380, San Isidro (+51-440 2320). **Larco Museum**, Av Bolívar 1515, Pueblo Libre (+51 461 1312; www.museolarco.org). **Las Pallas**, Calle Cajamarca 212, Barranco (+51-477 4629). **Lorena Pestana**, Calle Gral Borgoño 770, Miraflores (+51-446 4033). **MALI**, Parque

de la Exposición (+51-204 0000; www.mali.pe). **MATE**, Av Pedro de Osma 409, Barranco (+51-251 7755; www.mate.pe).

WHEN TO GO

The skies are overcast by coastal fog for much of the year, but in December-March the dry winds end and it is pleasantly warm.

HOW TO GET THERE

James Henderson travelled as a guest of **Aracari** (+51-651 2424; www.aracari.com), which offers tailor-made tours with guides from about £2,000 for three days, including accommodation and transfers. **British Airways** (www.britishairways.com) flies direct from Gatwick to Lima 2-3 times a week, from £650 return.