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LIMA

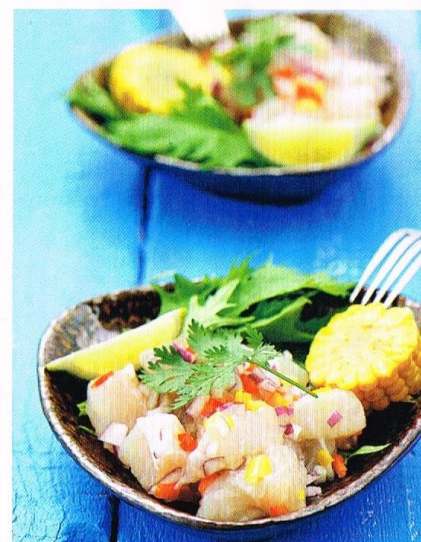
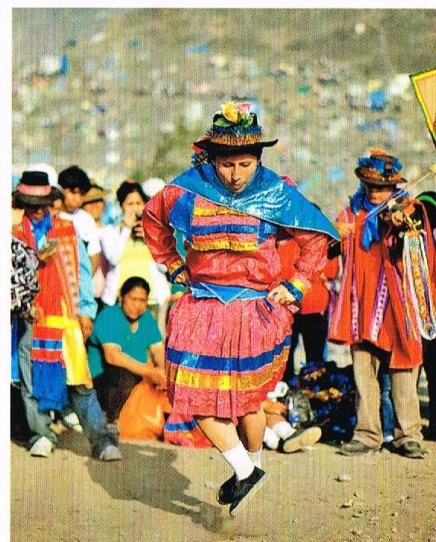
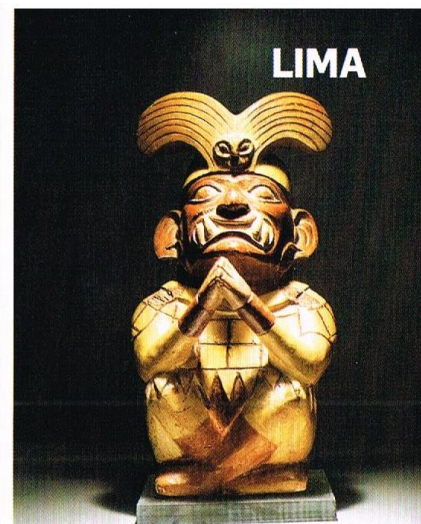
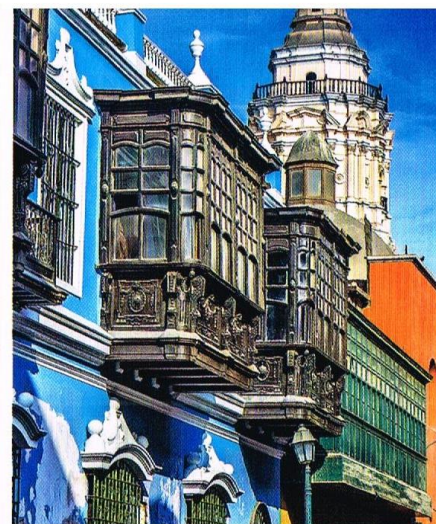
# Beauty and the beats

She was sexy, sparky, a party animal — and that was just Lima (more on the dream woman later). **Stanley Stewart** falls for Peru's feisty capital, at its most seductive in festival season

NOVEMBER 2016 SUNDAYTIMESTRAVEL 93



It takes two: dancing the intimate *Marinera Norteña*. Opposite, clockwise from top, old colonial buildings in Lima; ancient Peruvian art in the Larco Museum; Peruvian ceviche; Day of the Dead celebrations in the Nueva Esperanza Cemetery



It was the end of October, and Lima was veering between parties and prayers, between lemon-infused Pisco Sours and incense-scented mass. Down in the funky neighbourhood of Barranco, they were setting up the instruments for the year's best party, on Creole Music Day. Meanwhile, across town, in the Avenida Tacna, crowds of hysterical pilgrims were celebrating a religious miracle. Over the river in Rímac, the street fiestas were getting underway, as the bulls were transported to the *corrida* and the matadors got levered into their tight-fitting suits. Down the street, in the 16th-century Convent of the Descalzos, a barefoot Franciscan was at his prayers in front of a painting of the Virgin. Far above, on the steep slopes of Nueva Esperanza Cemetery, families would soon be picking their way up through the densely packed headstones, on the Day of the Dead, with picnics of rice and slow-roast pork, and guitars to serenade their relatives with their favourite songs. Which was probably why Ronald and I were in the cool gloom of the bar of the Hotel Maury – it was a momentary refuge from the Lima rollercoaster. It was also a relic from another age. Glasses of beer, beaded

with condensation, arrived with a barman who looked as if he might have served Garbo in the Grand Hotel. Pausing before hitting the down 'n' dirty district of Rímac, Ronald and I were the only customers.

Originally from the Netherlands, Ronald was in love with Lima, and was showing me around the city. He could be quite romantic: 'In Lima, the past is just under the skin,' he said, splaying his hand on the old wood of the bar. 'You can feel its heartbeat.' In the Hotel Maury, we were getting rather more than the heartbeat. In this Art Deco room, with its bevelled mirrors and smoked-glass lanterns, we seemed to have stepped through a magic curtain and reappeared in 1932.

Lima suffers from 'passing-through' syndrome. It has become a place to change planes, perhaps spend a night in order to catch an early flight up to Cuzco. But forget for a moment Machu Picchu with its international throngs of selfie sticks, and the Andes with the threat of altitude sickness and panpipes. I took a few days to explore Lima, and it was the highlight of my trip to Peru.

For three centuries, colonial Lima was the most alluring city in the Americas, all sweeping avenues and

Baroque churches, spacious squares and viceroy's palaces; a trophy city, proof that sophisticated cosmopolitan culture could take root in the New World. From here, the Spaniards once ruled a territory that included modern Peru as well as Chile, Bolivia and Ecuador.

Admittedly, after Independence, there was a tricky period when the chief economic activity was bird droppings. Guano was quite the commodity in the late 19th century, and Peru was the leading exporter. When London banks had to bail the country out in the 1890s, it was agreed that Lima could pay its interest in bird droppings (sadly no longer an option on your mortgage).

But these days things are looking up. The bird poo is ancient history. The economy is booming (in the '80s, they reformed the currency by the simple expediency of knocking off six zeros), the insurgent Shining Path guerrillas are yesterday's nightmare, and Lima has re-emerged as one of the great cities of the continent. And like any great city, it is the ethnic mix that makes it so exciting.

Inland, in the strongholds of the great Andean cultures, Peru may be largely indigenous. But down

#### TOP TEMPLE TIP

Lima is not all colonial grandeur — there are 237 Pre-Columbian sites. At spectacular Huaca Pucllana, Inca priests used to listen through a hearing tube to get the latest from an oracle frog at the hollow centre of the temple. Find it in Miraflores, five minutes' walk from Avenida Arequipa

here on the coast you find both the descendants of the Spanish colonisers and of the African slaves they brought here to do the heavy lifting. Musically, this dynamic rocks: Latino and African traditions is a fusion made in heaven. In Lima it is known as *música criolla* and today was La Día de la Canción Criolla, Creole Music Day. Ronald and I had booked to spend our evening in the heady atmosphere of rhythm, Pisco and killer dance moves. But first the neighbourhood of Rímac — for a religious miracle and some early porn. You don't get this kind of fun up in the Andes.

With the kind of atmospheric dilapidation that would make Detroit seem genteel, and street life that would make Naples seem dull, Rímac is gritty, poor, vibrant and thrilling. It was also Ronald's kind of place, where old mansions, stone-faced convents and elegant palaces lurk around every corner. Ronald pointed out a square that was once the slave market. He pointed out colonial villas, now sub-divided for dozens of families, where damsels once sat behind shuttered windows to check out the passing soldiers. He pointed out the 18th-century pleasure palace, Quinta de Presa, where African >



servants first heard Spanish dance music and began thinking how they could crank it up a bit.

On this festive day, crowds milled among the street stalls, swathed in smoke, selling *empanadas* and *salchipapas* and spit-roasted chicken. To get away from the crush, Ronald and I ducked into an alleyway, and found ourselves in a kind of poor man's gated community, a *callejón*, a network of alleyways with a single entrance inhabited by extended families. We were greeted by Carlos, who introduced us to a hat-trick of ex-wives and enough children to make up two football teams. Opening foaming bottles of beer for us, he declared, 'Tonight no-one will sleep. It is La Día de la Canción Criolla, the Day of Creole Music.' He leaned towards me with a smirk. 'We lock the gate and drop

Over in the stylish Larco Museum, ceramic figurines from the pre-Inca Mochica culture were busy illustrating sexual positions

Light entertainment:  
illuminated  
fountains in the Park  
of the Reserve, in  
downtown Lima

the key into a barrel of Pisco. We only take it out again when the barrel is empty.'

Meanwhile, across town, a crowd of a million or more had gathered to see a painting of Christ's Crucifixion carried aloft through the streets. Known as Señor de los Milagros, Lord of Miracles, the painting was made by an Angolan slave, and was the only thing in its district to survive the great earthquake of 1655. Now an object of hysterical veneration, it goes on tour in October, processing between churches in the city. As the painting inched closer, carried atop a silver litter by several dozen strong men, the crowds swooned and fireworks exploded. 'It is God's sign,' cried a woman, throwing her arms around my neck. 'Welcome to the Kingdom of Jesus.'

To discover what the ancients got up to before the arrival of the Kingdom of Jesus, Ronald and I headed over to the stylish Larco Museum, where ceramic figurines from the pre-Inca Mochica culture were busy illustrating an impressive compendium of sexual positions and activities. The Larco is one of the finest Pre-Columbian

museums in the world, with galleries of astonishing stone and wood carvings, gorgeous ancient tapestries, and skulls that show evidence of Inca brain surgery. But naturally it is the fellatio that stands out. Most of the Mochica guys seemed to be hung like horses, while their partners had a look of grim determination.

Across town in Barranco, size didn't matter. The band in Don Porfirio were playing the diminutive *charangos*, which looked like guitars made for dwarves. They were accompanied by three feverish percussionists – a castanet player, a chap on a pair of congas and a man drumming on a plywood box, like a tea chest. The box was the kind of thing on which backstage roadies drum. But in down home Creole music, where it is known as the *cajón*, the box gets to be centre stage, where its raucous rhythms have become the real heartbeat of Lima.

In the 19th century, Barranco was a fashionable seaside resort where Lima's aristocracy built Belle Époque summer villas. In the 21st century, it has become the city's bohemian neighbourhood, a Left Bank of artists, writers

and musicians, including the fashion photographer Mario Testino, whose MATE gallery is one of the new highlights. Barranco is now Party Central, full of atmospheric bars.

Don Porfirio is an old-style *peña* club, lively, rustic and devoted to *música criolla*. At the end of a passageway lined with photos of Creole musical greats, Ronald and I found a boisterous courtyard where bottles of beer and whisky, buckets of ice and Pisco Sours, were being ferried to the crowded tables. On a low stage in the far corner, the band was in full swing.

*Música criolla* began with Spanish dance music – waltzes and polkas, galliards and jigs, that were then injected with energetic rhythms and harsh insistent vocals by African slaves. It has its world stars – Susana Baca, Eva Ayllón, Chabuca Granda – but it really belongs to the street corners of Barranco, to bars with a handful of drinkers and a few dancing couples. October 31 is its big night, when the music is celebrated across Lima.

The songs were rooted in the city. They were about gazing at the Pacific from a balcony on Avenida Saenz ▶

## LIMA

### FIRST LINE YOUR STOMACH...

The best meal in Lima is still ceviche (lime-marinated seafood), which came to the city with the Conquistadors. Best place for it? Lima's seaport, El Callao. Try tiny Restaurant Don Giuseppe, on Avenida Grau





Crowd and glory: clockwise from top left, the Lord of the Miracles procession; a Pisco Sour; musicians in a local bar; Lima's colonial City Hall building



Peña, about festivals in Rimac, about nights in Barranco, about meeting a girl on a trolleybus on the Paseo de la República. Clapping like another instrument, the crowd were a wonderful mix of old-timers – men in dark suits and women in wide flounced dresses – and the young who had found in this retro vibe Lima's best night out.

The dance floor was full of splendidly ill-matched couples. An elderly moustachioed fellow who looked like a Peruvian Groucho Marx in flat cap and cravat was twirling a young woman in skinny jeans and a sleeveless top. An enormous woman in a red dress several sizes too small for her had a slender black guy in what could be mistaken for a headlock.

The best matched couple were two professional dancers who took to the floor at regular intervals to illustrate the variety of Peruvian dance styles. He was a handsome dark-eyed lothario. She was... well... she was simply stunning. When she first appeared in a strapless glittering bodice and full flared skirt, I was smitten. She arched, she undulated, she spun, she shimmered. She seemed to swim through the music. She had a long cervine neck and a hip-wagging thing so subtly and profoundly erotic that I found myself blushing, dry-mouthed, staring into my Pisco Sour.

The dancer spun. She had a hip-wagging thing so subtly and profoundly erotic that I found myself blushing into my Pisco Sour

She re-appeared in various guises through the evening. A bugle sounded and she suddenly arrived barefoot, in a white peasant's frock, with flowers in her hair, for the Marinera Norteña, a courtship dance that involved a lot of serious handkerchief flicking. Later the lights dimmed and she materialised in a close-fitting silk gown for the Vals Criollo, skimming across the floor

like a skater. I hoped I wasn't drooling.

A white-haired gentleman was seated at the next table, equipped for the evening with a bottle of scotch and an inexhaustible supply of salt crackers. He was a kind of taxi dancer, with carnation button-hole and a silk tie. Between performances of the professionals, he invited every woman in the club to dance, graciously squiring them one by one with the silkiest moves on the dance floor.

Solicitous and curious, he drew us into conversation. He was born in Lima, and wanted to hear about our travels. He was impressed that we'd been to Rimac, and nodded sagely about the erotica in the Larco Museum.

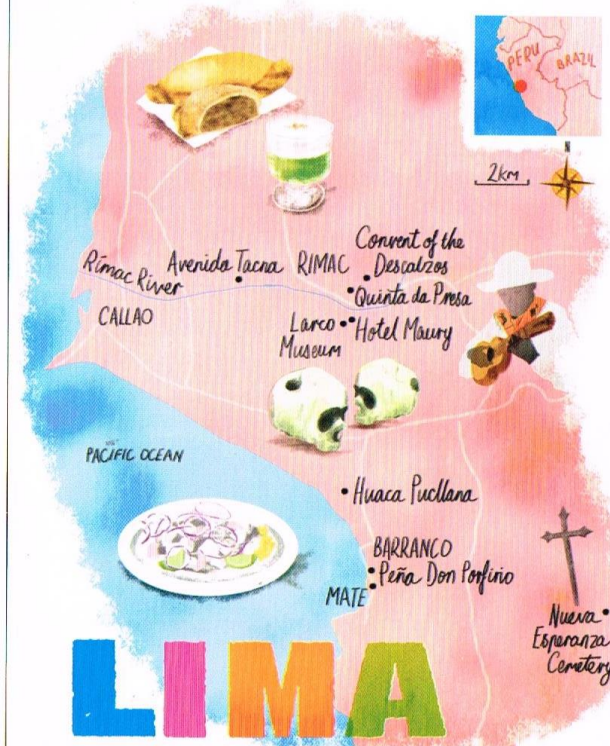
"Three pieces of advice," he said. "First, go to Callao for the *ceviche*, the best in the world." He smacked his lips. "Second, go to the Gold Museum. Not so much sex but the Incas were artists with gold." He rolled his eyes in appreciation.

He filled his glass, and offered us some salt crackers. "And the third piece of advice?" I asked.

"The third? Oh yes, of course." He looked at me, smiling his avuncular smile. "Forget the dancer." He placed a kindly hand on my knee. "She is my wife."

PHOTOGRAPHS: ALAMY; GETTY; MASTERFILE; ROBERT HARDING; STOCKFOOD

## LIMA



## Get Me There

map: Scott Jessop

### Go independent

**BA** (ba.com) flies to Lima, direct or via Madrid, from £653 return. Or try **Avia** (avianca.com), via Bogotá.

### Where to stay

**The Hotel B** (00 511206 0800, hotelb.pe; doubles from £264, B&B), in Barranco, has retro-styled rooms, a classic bar, great restaurant and a gallery's worth of art. A cheaper option, the **Dazzler Lima** (00 511634 4000, dazzlerhoteles.com; doubles from £110, B&B) has stylish rooms of dark wood and a rooftop restaurant. The oceanfront **JW Marriot** (00 511 217 7000, marriot.com; doubles from £214, room only) is a five-star leviathan with all the top facilities.

### Where to eat

**Isolina** (00 5112247 5075, isolina.pe; mains about £10), a stripped-back revival of an old Barranco taverna, has the best traditional Peruvian dishes in town. Try the delicious *tortilla de sesos de ancho*: calf's brain omelette with parmesan.

### Where to dance

It doesn't get any more authentic than **Peña Don Porfirio** (facebook.com/donporfirio.official); Friday nights only, things kick off about 9pm.

### Go packaged

**Aracari Travel** (00 5116512424, aracari.com), a Peruvian travel specialist, can arrange four days in Lima with expert local guides and an evening at a *peña* club, from £1,210pp, B&B, excluding flights. Or, its eight-day 'Classic Luxury Peru' trip takes in Lima, Machu Picchu and Cuzco, costs from £3,844pp, with transfers, but excluding flights.

### Further information

Various excitements converge in Lima late autumn. The processions of the Lord of Miracles are on October 18, 19 and 28, but dates vary for the return to the home church a few days later. Creole Music Day is on October 31. All Saints Day is on November 1. The Day of the Dead is on November 2. Ronald Eward at **Lima Walks** offers excellent walking tours of the city, from £9pp (limawalks.com.pe).