

Serendipity in South America



The 17th century Jesuit church of La Compañía, with its sword-wielding St. John, is a European-South American blend. (Deanna MacDonald)

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Special to The Times

FEBRUARY 13, 2005 | AREQUIPA, PERU

"When the moon separated from the Earth, it forgot to take Arequipa."

I could almost believe this local saying as I walked into Arequipa's Plaza de Armas near midnight on a warm May evening. The air smelled of flowering trees, and moonlight played across the pale cathedral and the two-story arcades that encircle the square. Every inch was constructed of white sillar stone hewed from the snow-capped volcanic mountains that rose behind the cathedral.

The scene shimmered with a dreamlike quality, yet the plaza's central park was bustling with locals, long since accustomed to their magnificent surroundings, strolling and chatting.

With some of the best Spanish Colonial architecture in South America, a vibrant food culture and a picturesque locale in a fertile valley between the mountains and desert of southern Peru, Arequipa may be one of the more amazing cities you've never heard of.

At least my partner, Matthew, and I hadn't before an airline agent told us that the only flight that would get us back to Lima in time for our flight home was from Arequipa. This would mean a long and bumpy bus ride for us from Lake Titicaca (about six hours north of Arequipa), but from our first glimpse of Peru's second-largest city, we knew we had stumbled onto a find.

Called *la ciudad blanca* (the white city) for the stone used to build it, Arequipa reminded me of southern Spain in its lushness and architecture. Yet this ancient city has roots that date to the Incan Empire (1200-1535). One story claims that the Inca leader Mayta Capac was so moved by the region's beauty that he ordered his entourage to "*Ari, quipay*," or "Yes, stay" in Quechua. Another story suggests the name means "the place behind the pointed mountain."

Whatever its source, Spanish conquistadors kept the name and re-founded the city in 1540. Arequipa soon became rich as a key stop on the trade route from the silver mines of Bolivia to the coast and from a prosperous cattle and farming industry, which is still active today. Modern-day Arequipa boasts a mix of impressive architecture and ancestry that reflects its dual colonial Spanish and native Amerindian heritage.

There is a great pride in being an Arequipeño that helps give this city — today the commercial capital of southern Peru and the hometown of several prominent business people, politicians and intellectuals (such as playwright and novelist [Mario Vargas Llosa](#) — a look and feel that is distinctive from the rest of Peru.

Architectural treasures Our hotel, Casa de Melgar, reflected Arequipa's history. This friendly hotel in what was an 18th century bishop's residence felt like a Colonial hacienda and was filled with antiques and indigenous folk art. Its courtyard had ochre-colored walls dotted with antique pottery and wrought-iron work. Our room — a steal at \$24 — had a domed ceiling and sky-blue sillar walls decorated with hand-woven cloth.

The best way to explore the city is on foot, so we wandered along cobblestone streets admiring the multitude of 18th century Colonial mansions dotting the city center.

Even a visit to the bank in Arequipa can be an architectural treat. Looking for a bank machine, we wandered into Casa Ricketts, a 1738 seminary that is now the Banco Continental (on Calle San Francisco). We withdrew our sols in a sculpted stone courtyard beneath capitals of Baroque angels and saints.

Casa de Moral — a bank at Moral and Bolívar streets — is another extraordinary structure. Built by a Spanish knight, the intricate heraldic carvings above its portal depict snakes slithering from a puma's mouth, a design found in the arts of the Nazca Amerindians.

Even more striking is the 17th century Jesuit church of La Compañía, on the southeastern edge of the plaza. The church has somehow survived the earthquakes that frequently strike the region (the latest in 2001, magnitude 8.1, left five dead in Arequipa) and amazes visitors with its profuse ornamentation. Zigzags, spirals, flowers, faces and the date of the work's completion (1698) are engraved into the façade.

The interior is pure gilded Peruvian Baroque, a combination of European art forms and South American sensibilities. Angels with Amerindian faces smile down at visitors from altarpieces, and a sword-wielding St.

James on horseback carved above the south portal looks more conquistador than saint.

But the most fascinating complex in Arequipa has to be Monasterio de Santa Catalina, founded in 1580. This sprawling walled convent is practically a city within a city — and is a bit like walking into an unusual, bygone world. We spent hours exploring its maze of twisting streets and flower-filled courtyards, all lined with adobe houses of ocher, white and blue, which were once the nuns' quarters.

For 300 years, the Spanish elite deposited daughters here, and the girls brought along servants and luxury goods, giving the convent a hedonistic reputation. Rumors of decadent parties (even orgies) circulated, but the convent remained a mystery until the 1970s, when Arequipa's mayor forced it to open its doors to the public. Today about 30 nuns still live in a small part of the complex.

From its rooftop we took in the panoramic views over the city to volcanic peaks that ring the city: El Misti, Chachani and Pichu Pichu, all of which reach close to 20,000 feet. This must have been a tantalizing glimpse of the outside world for generations of cloistered women.

Nearby, at the Museum of the Catholic University of Santa María, we discovered the story of another, more ancient Arequipeña: the mummified Inca princess, known as Juanita.

Preserved in ice for more than 500 years before anthropologists found her at the summit of Mt. Ampato in 1995, Juanita was about 13 when she was given the dubious honor of being sacrificed, most likely to pacify the capricious volcanic gods. Her tiny mummified form, still wrapped in an alpaca blanket, is displayed along with an interesting exhibit on Inca religious practices.

After catching glimpses of the surrounding countryside from rooftops, we decided to explore some of the city's outskirts. We hailed a taxi and attracted the eye of Diego, a good-humored driver who took great pride in his city and made sure we saw all we needed to see.

Our goal was the Colonial estate of Arequipa's founder, Garci Manuel de Carbajal. This elegantly restored estate, known as the Mansión del Fundador, is in a picturesque valley surrounded by cultivated fields about six miles outside the city.

Eiffel was here too Along the way, Diego asked whether we had seen the "puente de Eiffel." The Eiffel Tower, yes ... but the Eiffel Bridge? We'd never heard of it. "Oh no," said Diego, "you *must* see it."

We soon found ourselves on a 19th century bridge that indeed had been designed by Gustave Eiffel and was once one of the longest in the world. Today it cuts through a well-off Arequipa suburb and evokes Arequipa's ties to Europe.

Diego filled us in on local history as he took us on scenic detours through picturesque villages and up hills for panoramic views. Once at Mansión del Fundador, he accompanied us inside, adding a bit of spice to the exhibits with tales of the founding family's escapades worthy of any good afternoon soap.

There was no charge for this personal tour and Diego refused to take anything extra. It was his pleasure, he said, to show us his home. If there was any doubt remaining as to the warm and generous disposition of Peruvians, Diego put the question to rest.

Between exploring the historic streets of the city and surroundings, we enthusiastically investigated Arequipa's other claim to fame: food. Our first lunch was at Cevichería Fory Foy, which serves nothing but Peru's tastiest dish, ceviche — fish marinated in lime juice and herbs.

Although the restaurant was packed with locals — as with most places we ate, we were the only tourists in sight — a friendly waitress found us a table and in minutes we were sipping a cool Arequipeña, a local brew, and nibbling on a bowl of *cancha*, salty fried corn.

Soon generous bowls of ceviche *de pescado* (fish) and ceviche *de mariscos* (shellfish) appeared, in a cool broth topped with thinly sliced onions, seaweed and a slice of sweet potato. It was simultaneously sweet and salty and deliciously refreshing on a hot day.

In search of local fare Afterward, in search of beer glasses for souvenirs, we wandered through the busy local market, a crowded combination of enclosed stores and open-air stalls where the goods were as diverse as refrigerators, cooking pots and local produce.

Like a medieval market, stalls selling similar items clustered together. Vendors sold potatoes and corn in sizes and colors I had never imagined; Peru has 400 varieties of potatoes and 250 types of corn.

We got many joking offers of great deals on a side of dried beef or a bag of purple corn from vendors who clearly didn't see much tourist traffic.

We tasted more of the local produce at the popular restaurant Sol de Mayo in the pretty suburb of Yanahuara. Locals told us that we'd find "real Arequipeño food" in the suburbs where most people live.

It's a scenic 30-minute walk from the center — passing by the lovely 18th century Iglesia de Yanahuara overlooking El Misti — to this 100-year-old restaurant. It's set in a beautiful ochre adobe building built around a lush garden, where Altiplano musicians serenaded the lunch crowds.

A welcoming, bow-tied waiter who was clearly amused by the two gringos who had found their way to this suburban oasis, seated us in the garden among the families sipping pisco sours (a tasty concoction of Peruvian brandy, lime juice, egg white and sugar) and devouring large plates of local specialties, such as *chicharrón de chancho* (fried pork), *ocopa* (potatoes in a spicy sauce), *choclo* (white corn), *rocoto relleno* (spicy stuffed bell peppers) and the unique *cuy chactao* (roast guinea pig).

We dug into our meal with gusto but barely made a dent in the delicious portions. We apologized to our waiter for not emptying our plates. But he assured us with a smile that it was fine. "You must save room for the main course!" Sure enough, as we exchanged incredulous glances, even larger plates arrived. Clearly we had a bit to learn about ordering a meal.

We tried again at another popular restaurant, Tradición Arequipeña, also in Yanahuara. Lunch was a family affair but weekend evenings were clearly for partying.

By 7 o'clock on Saturday, this big open-air restaurant was a full-scale fiesta, complete with live music, a packed dance floor and crowds of locals eating and drinking. We happily joined in and many hours later, we wandered out, flushed from the food (we still ordered too much), the pisco and the music and thanked our lucky stars for full flights and a serendipitous discovery of an extraordinary city.

Surprise in Peru's white stone city

GETTING THERE:

From LAX, LanChile and Continental offer connecting service (change of planes) to Arequipa. Restricted round-trip fares begin at \$704.

There are frequent flights and buses to Arequipa from Lima, Cuzco, Juliaca and other Peruvian cities. One-way bus fares, \$15-\$25; plane flights, \$59-\$79.

TELEPHONES:

To call the numbers below from the U.S., dial 011 (the international calling code), 51 (country code for Peru), 54 (the city code for Arequipa) and the local number.

WHERE TO STAY:

Casa de Melgar, 108 Calle Melgar, Arequipa; 222-459, <http://www.lared.net.pe/lacasademelgar> . A double room with bath is usually \$35.

Hostal La Casa de Mi Abuela, 606 Calle Jerusalén, Arequipa; 241-206, <http://www.lacasademiabuela.com> . A family-run hotel. Doubles begin at \$33.

WHERE TO EAT:

Cevichería Fory Foy, 221 Thomas, Arequipa; 242-400. Lunch only. About \$5 per person.

Sol de Mayo, 207 Jerusalén 207, Yanahuara; 254-148. Open 11 a.m. to 11 p.m. daily. Entrees \$3.50-\$10.

Tradición Arequipeña, 111 Dolores, Paucarpata; 426-467. Open noon to 10 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays, noon to 7 p.m. Sundays to Thursdays. \$5-\$12 per person.

TO LEARN MORE:

Andean Travel Web, <http://www.andeantravelweb.com/peru>.

— Deanna MacDonald