

"I REALISED THAT MY SURREALLY STILL, LUNAR-LIKE ENVIRONMENT WAS, AS WITH MOST OF MY TRIP, NOT QUITE WHAT I HAD EXPECTED"

# Losing your head in peru

TRAVELLING FROM LIMA ALONG PERU'S NORTHERN COAST, EXPLORING ITS RICH PRE-INCAN HERITAGE AND STUNNING ECOLOGY, **PETER FEELY** SURFS, MEETS WHALES AND UNCOVERS AN ANCIENT APPETITE FOR DECAPITATION...



## WRITER PROFILE

NAME **PETER FEELY**

AGE **26**

**INFO** Despite having travelled extensively across Asia, Europe, Australia and America, this was Peter's first trip to South America. With Peru leaving a strong impression, he hopes to return as soon as he can, with Colombia high on his list of places to explore next.

**E**ven as an adult, my imagination sometimes gets the better of me. Good taste falls by the wayside and I regress to the inappropriate thoughts of a miscreant. Luckily, when such moments occur, I've trained myself to keep quiet.

Such a scenario happened as I wandered the pre-Incan site of Huacas del Moche in northern Peru. As I sauntered around the sacred ruins, attempting to convey an outward appearance of considered contemplation to my diminutive 59-year-old Peruvian guide, Edith, I was busy mulling over the pros and cons of human sacrifice, and wondering if I knew anyone objectionable enough to deserve such a grisly fate, with a view to compiling a list.

I partly blame my environment for the lapse in decorum. Eerily devoid of the murmurings and buzz created by other travellers, the ashen desert landscape had an unsettling, inhospitable, almost malevolent quality. After I'd reassured the formidable Edith that she had my complete attention through a brief review of basic facts,

I realised that my surreally still, lunar-like environment was, as with most of my trip, not quite what I had expected.

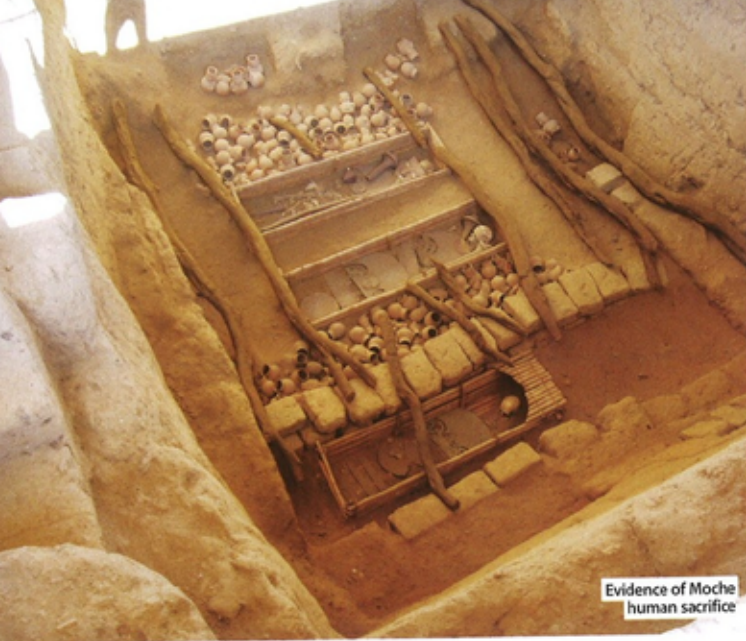
Northern Peru is, in tourism terms, somewhat overshadowed by its southern companion. Not having the backpacking Mecca of Machu Picchu to draw the crowds, the north is often neglected in favour of its famous southern compatriot. But littered with pre-Incan ruins, interesting colonial architecture, unspoilt beaches, unique environmental attractions and world-class surf, any amateur archaeologists with a penchant for surfing, marine life and an aversion to crowds may have found their ideal destination.

Lima, the likely stop if flying from Europe, is Peru's sprawling and cosmopolitan capital. My arrival coincided with the city's unfortunate weather condition called *garúa* (a damp sea fog that lingers over the place through the winter from May to November). The cloudy, grey atmosphere had unwelcome similarities to the English weather I'd left behind, but luckily the slightly drab conditions weren't replicated in the

temperature. It's a lively city which remains mild throughout the year, and I was reassured that summers are beach-friendly and sunny.

A quick tour of the sites was followed by a meal at Lima's renowned Asrid y Gastón restaurant. Run by Peruvian celebrity chef Gastón Acurio, this upmarket and trendy eatery was my first introduction to two Peruvian staples: ceviche and pisco sour. Ceviche is a cold dish of raw fish with lime, onions and spices. Jetlagged, I had visions of losing my lunch in unsuitably plush surroundings, but thankfully it was good. Sr. Acurio, Peruvian TV's less profanity-inclined answer to Gordon Ramsey, created his posh version with slices of tuna. Prior to the ceviche, I was treated to the aperitif, pisco sour. Invented in Lima, this is a boozy grappa-based concoction involving egg whites, sours and lime (Chile also claims the invention but the Peruvians are adamant it's theirs). As 'interesting' as it sounds, it's an acquired taste – but never one to admit defeat, I persevered with the specialty and soon came to appreciate its inebriating effect before lunch.





Evidence of Moche human sacrifice



coloured frescos that provide a captivating insight into the customs of its ancient inhabitants. With vibrant yellows, reds, blues, whites and blacks depicting ray fish, birds and serpents, and the water, air and land, the strong relationship this ancient civilisation had with its environment is readily apparent.

However, despite seemingly strong environmental credentials, the discovery in 1995 of 42 skeletons belonging to sacrificial victims also indicates the Moches'

mindfulness enough to forget his appetite for beheading, the friezes that depict his body usually have the additional prompt of a severed head dangling in his right hand.

As the numbers discovered in 1995 appear to indicate, the Moches were quite industrious in their head lopping, although the reasoning behind the mass sacrifices is unsure. There are various theories, including the site being a temple to the mountain gods (on account of it being at the foot of Cerro Blanco) or that the site was a monument to important deceased. Intriguingly, sediment from the excavated graves of the sacrificial dead indicates that the executions took place during an El Niño weather phenomenon, raising the possibility that the sacrifices occurred as a reaction to climate change.

My now regular midday pisco sour, followed by a seafood lunch, was taken at the nearby fishing town of Huanchaco. Seemingly geared towards visitors, with hotels and restaurants, it's a popular, laid back spot, well known for its surfing and precarious-looking reed fishing



boats. The small *caballitos de totora* (little horses of totora reeds) have been used for centuries and are designed to ride the waves in a similar way to surfing, although despite delusions about my own surfing proficiency, I wouldn't fancy my chances.

Also in proximity to Trujillo are the ruins of the world's largest adobe city, Chan Chán. Created entirely using sun dried mud bricks, the city was the capital of the Chimú empire. The successors to the Moche people, the Chimú continued where their sacrifice-happy predecessors left off, with ornate pottery and friezes being the main examples of their culture (neither civilisation have written records). We headed to the most popular part, the Tschudi sector, where the high-walled ruins and passageways give a good indication of what the city would have been like in its pomp. While the motifs are no longer brightly coloured due to weather damage, some of the designs have been restored. I had mixed feelings about the restorations, an opinion I suspect I shared with an uncharacteristically evasive Edith. However, with its seemingly endless mazes and secret passages, there's the opportunity to



The native viringo dog

compensate for any misgivings by scampering around, pretending to be Indiana Jones, and the size of the place is undoubtedly impressive. Anyone with a fondness for the sound of their own voice will find the experience particularly enjoyable. Boasting a council room that was designed to amplify acoustics to an unusually high level, Chan Chán can gift even the feeblest, puniest excuses for voices a boom that Brian Blessed would be proud of.



coastal Pan American Highway towards the commercial town of Chiclayo. The journey offered both an opportunity to sit and peer at the rural population going about their daily business and to witness the dramatic scenery. From flat, grey desert landscape, the environment would change to mountainous scenes reminiscent of a western movie, then to long stretches of empty beaches – all in the space of several hours.

From Chiclayo, it was a short journey to the Sipan Museum, which houses artefacts from the tomb of a prominent Moche priest. Unlike most tombs, none of the valuables were half-inched by looters and the wealth of treasures remained entirely intact until their discovery by archaeologists in 1987. The modern museum is impressive, and has all of the attributes I appreciate in vaguely educational experiences, such as funky lighting, short movies, nice photographs and eye-catching displays. Although briefly distracted by perplexing thoughts about how Sr. Sipan managed to balance a dinner-plate-sized piece of gold nose jewellery from his septum, my usually fickle attention span was engaged more than enough to justify the visit.

Having improved my knowledge on archaeology to the extent that I now feel confident that I could easily hold my own with Tony Robinson, I was ready for some activity-based antics.

With a misguided enthusiasm for surfing (the last experience had been embarrassingly devoid of much in the way of upright balance and left me with an unsightly hole

Following my Indiana Jones moment at Chan Chán, I was weighing up how much abuse my friends would unleash if I took to wearing a suitably weathered brown safari hat, when I was reminded of one of the numerous things that differentiate us: horses. While Dr Jones is happy on horseback, galloping after an adversary, I find the creatures slightly worrying and unpredictable, so lunch at the stables just outside Trujillo was an ominous proposition. Luckily, experts would be enacting the Peruvian tradition of Cabello de Paso. In combination with two courting dancers in traditional costume, the Paso breed of horse and its rider somehow manage to 'jig' along (at somewhere between a trot and a canter) in time to the music. If this isn't impressive and daft enough, the rider also steers the horse, agilely, in perilously close loops around the wooing dancers, chopping and changing directions.

#### A CHANGING LANDSCAPE

After the unusual equestrian antics, we enjoyed a drive along the

fascinating archaeological sites of the area's former civilisations. Our first stop, and arguably the most impressive site, was the Huacas Del Moche. A pre-Incan civilisation, the Moches date from around 100BC to 750AD. The imposing Huaca (temple) of the Sun is the larger of the two temples that make up the site. The gigantic square-topped pyramid dominates the barren landscape, although unfortunately the occupying Spaniards decided to divert a river through the site, destroying up to a third of the original structure. Luckily, the sheer scale of the adobe edifice retains a sense of powerful majesty.

#### THE DECAPITATOR

Around 500 metres away from the Huaca of the Sun is the smaller Huaca del Luna (Moon). According to the no-nonsense Edith, the purpose of the place was unrelated to its irrelevant Spanish appointed name. Nestled at the foothills of the dramatic Cerro Blanco mountain,

### "THE DISCOVERY OF 42 SKELETONS BELONGING TO SACRIFICIAL VICTIMS INDICATES THE MOCHES' ENTHUSIASM FOR HUMAN SACRIFICE"

this temple was seen as relatively insignificant in comparison to its weightier neighbour until the 1990s, when the wealth of geometric friezes that decorate the clay interior were discovered. With multiple layers that were covered and redecorated by subsequent generations, excavation has revealed well preserved multi-

enthusiasm for human sacrifice. The main Moche deity, Ai-Apaec, or 'The Decapitator' as he's affectionately known, is an unfriendly looking anthropomorphic individual, with feline fangs, boggly eyes and various other adornments to remind his God-fearing inferiors of his menacing potential. If any of 'The Decapitator's' flock were absent



in my chin), I was looking forward to visiting the beach resort of Máncora. Having seen *Point Break*, been surfing in Australia and having an acute awareness of my fondness for alcoholic refreshment, a laid-back surf haven with an abundance of bars sounded pretty good. With the additional incentive of the possibility of seeing dolphins, whales and tortoises, as well as a bit of snorkelling and sunshine and warm weather throughout the year, I needed little encouragement.

We stayed at the Vichayito Bungalows, a complex a few kilometres from Máncora, where the accommodation was an idyll of beach huts on stilts with straw roofs. The place exudes relaxation and peace, with the sound of the sea lapping against the large expanse of empty beach a welcome intrusion to the tranquillity.

Early the next morning, we took a boat trip from the bungalows with a company called Pacifico Adventures. Our hyperactive host, Sebastian, proved to be an engaging, knowledgeable, compelling and amusing guide, despite the faintly irritating sense that he led an enviably perfect existence. A marine biologist, his organisation has a strong ethical philosophy, aiming to include locals



in the benefits and development of tourism in the area, with the ultimate goal of creating legislation for the preservation of the unique ecosystem and natural resources. With the collision of the cold Humboldt and warm El Niño ocean currents occurring in the area, there's an abundance of marine life and world-class surfing, with the nearby Cabo Blanco boasting Peru's (and arguably one of the world's) best left breaking waves.

There is a strong fishing presence, too, with the relatively small and

primitive vessels in abundance in the harbours providing a sobering reminder of the tumultuous and difficult lives of the local fisherman (there are several fatalities every year). In 1951, a certain Ernest Hemmingway spent several months in Cabo Blanco marlin fishing, which was the inspiration for his famous novel, *The Old Man And The Sea*. The bay also holds the record for the largest fish ever caught with a rod, a 710kg black marlin in 1953.

With Sebastian's expertise, we spent time observing a whale in its

natural ocean habitat, with only our small boat and the distant shoreline for distractions. With whale watching a huge industry in other parts of the world, I felt incredibly lucky to witness the surprisingly elegant creature in an environment where I didn't feel I was disturbing anything, and, selfishly, my experience wasn't hampered by the presence of dozens of other tourists and boats. Sebastian had a very realistic outlook, recognising the necessity for the financial incentive of tourism in securing the future of the whales, but simultaneously being mindful of the need to protect his passion, demonstrated by him never allowing our boat to impose on the creature to the extent of causing it distress. There was also an opportunity to snorkel and swim, allowing me to experience, first hand, the bizarre way in which the two colliding currents affect water temperature, so that there's a noticeable and slightly freaky fluctuation between warm and cold.

An afternoon surf lesson was the perfect antidote to the profound issues raised by Sebastian. Falling

## infobox

Pete flew to Peru via Amsterdam with KLM ([www.klm.com](http://www.klm.com)). LAN Peru also connects the UK with Peru ([www.lan.com](http://www.lan.com)) and Iberia offers flights via Madrid ([www.iberia.com](http://www.iberia.com)).

### TOURS

Real Peru offers a 12-day itinerary in the north, including Trujillo, Chiclayo and five days on the beach, from £1,200 per person. This includes a mixture of three- and four-star hotels, all transport, transfers, tours, guides, entrance fees and breakfast every day. International flights are extra and can be arranged from £600 per person. 0113 216 1440, [www.therealperu.co.uk](http://www.therealperu.co.uk)

### ACCOMMODATION

Libertador Lima and Trujillo  
[www.libertador.com.pe](http://www.libertador.com.pe)

Gran Hotel Chiclayo  
[www.granhotelchiclayo.com.pe](http://www.granhotelchiclayo.com.pe)

Vichayito Bungalows  
[www.vichayito.com](http://www.vichayito.com)

### VISAS

British passport holders do not require a visa for stays of up to 180 days.

### HEALTH

There is a risk of yellow fever in areas east of the Andes and jungle areas below 2,300m, but not including Cusco and Machu Picchu. Vaccinations against cholera, hepatitis A+B, rabies, tetanus, TB and typhoid should be considered. There is a high risk of malaria in the Amazon basin along the border with Brazil, a risk in other rural areas below 1,500, but no risk in Lima and the coastal region to the south.

### MORE INFORMATION

Peru tourist board  
[www.peru.info](http://www.peru.info)

off a forgivingly buoyant board in ideal novice conditions highlighted both my need to practise surfing and again emphasised yet another reason people from Lima flock to Máncora for their holidays. Several ego-cementing high fives with the surf instructor in celebration of my persistence, followed by a few beers by the beach, left me in suitably high spirits.

Left with a sense of having seen an alternative side to Peru, beyond the South American backpacker experience, its ancient ruins and temples have left an indelible mark on my imagination. Nevertheless, I couldn't help feeling slightly disappointed that I hadn't had a chance to catch the world's largest marlin or conquer the Cabo Blanco wave. However, with people like Sebastian looking out for its future, I've got an optimistic sense that northern Peru's cultural treasures and precious environment might just remain in tact for any future attempts... ■