

Chapter 11 - Lake Titicaca: Island of the Sun, Uros Floating Islands

The Children of the Sun

The following myth was recorded by Inca Garcilaso de la Vega in Vol. 1 of The Royal Commentaries of the Inca.

In times of old, our land was one of shrubs and small trees and tall mountains. The people were unmannered and untaught. They lived as wild animals live, without clothes made from woven cloth, without houses, and without cultivated food. They lived apart from other human beings in small family groups, finding lodging as nature provided it, within mountain caves and in hollow places beneath the great rocks. They covered their bodies with animal skins, leaves, and the bark of trees, or they wore no clothes at all. They gathered whatever food they could find to eat, such as grass, wild berries, and the roots of plants, and sometimes they ate human flesh.

Father Sun looked down from the heavens and pitied these humans who lived like wild creatures. He decided to send one of his sons, Manco Capac, and one of his daughters, Mama Ocllo Huaco, down to earth at Lake Titicaca to teach them how to improve their lives.

When his children were ready to leave, the Sun said to them, "I devote myself to the well-being of the universe. Each day, I travel across the sky so that I can look down upon the earth and see what I can do for the human beings who live there. My heat provides them with the comfort of warmth. My light provides them with the knowledge that comes from sight. It is through my efforts that fields and forests provide food for them, for I bring sunshine and rain, each in its proper season. Yet all this, good as it is, is not enough. The people live like wild animals. They know nothing of living in houses, wearing clothing, or raising food. They have no villages, they use no tools or utensils, and they have no laws. Therefore, I am making you the rulers of all the races in the region of Lake Titicaca; I want you to rule those peoples as a father rules his children. Treat them as I have treated you, with tenderness and affection, with devotion and justice. Teach them as I have taught you, for the races of human beings are my children also. I am their provider and their protector, and it is time they stopped living like animals. . . .

So Manco Capac and Mama Ocllo Huaco went down to Lake Titicaca.
[World Mythology, an Anthology of the Great Myths and Epics, by Donna Rosenberg, p. 474-5]

The boat ride from Copacabana to the Island of the Sun (Isla del Sol) took us past several small islets that seemed like stepping stones from the mainland. Further on, we would pass through the kilometer-wide Strait of Yampupata, which divided the Island of the Sun from the Copacabana peninsula.



We sat on top of the two-level boat with the other passengers who wanted a full view of Lake Titicaca, which looked like an irregular-shaped inland basin of water on the map. Its length from northwest to southeast stretched about 130 miles (209 km), and its width varied, the widest part being about 41 miles (66 km). According to geologists, in ancient times the lake was part of a sea that was lifted up to its present location and height of 12,506 feet (3812 meters) above sea level during the uplift that formed the Andes mountains about five to twenty million years ago. Now the lake was situated in the antiplano basin between the eastern and western Andes.

There was a young Israeli couple that was sitting across from us on top of the boat. I recognized some of the Hebrew words that they were speaking amongst themselves.

“Are you from Israel?” I asked, hoping to start a conversation with the tall gentleman and his shorter lady partner.

“Yes, we are,” answered the young lady. “How did you know?”

“I recognized some of the Hebrew words, like ken (yes) and lo (no),” I said, showing my limited knowledge of the Hebrew language. “I went to Israel several years ago on a pilgrimage, and I tried to learn some Hebrew survival vocabulary.”

“Where did you go in Israel?” asked the tall gentleman in clear English.

“I was with a Jewish travel group, and we went to Tel Aviv, Haifa, Golan Heights, the Sea of Galilee, Caesarea, Bet Shean, the Dead Sea, Masada, Acre, Safed, and, of course, Jerusalem,” I enumerated some of the memorable places that I had visited. “I even prayed at the Western Wall.”

“That Western Wall has caused us more harm than good,” said the young lady. “They should just give it to the Palestinians so that we can have peace.”

“You mean it doesn’t have the same religious meaning to the young generation as it does to orthodox Jews?” I asked, realizing that the young Israelis were of a different mindset.

“We would rather live in peace than live in constant threat of war with the Arab world,” said the tall gentleman, whose name I later learned was Elihu (“whose God is Jah”). “We both served in the Israeli army, and we understand what it means to be on constant alert.”

“Where did you serve?” I asked, thinking of the Israeli military camps and armament that I had seen when I was at the Golan Heights, overlooking Lebanon and Syria.

“We served mostly at the border crossing at Elat, near the Sinai Peninsula,” said Elihu. “I was an officer.”

“And I was in charge of checking documents,” added Michel (“gift from God”), whose name I correctly pronounced with the /h/ sound.

“So now you are on vacation?” I asked.

“Actually, we just finished our six years of service, and we’re touring the world,” said Michel. “That’s part of the life of a soldier, to serve and then to travel.”

“So that’s why I saw the sign in Hebrew in Copacabana,” I said, recalling the advertisement.

“I wish they wouldn’t advertise Israeli presence like that,” said Michel. “We learned English in the military, so we don’t need to see signs in Hebrew.”

“Yes, both of you speak English very well,” I complimented them.

We had developed a friendship by the time our boat went through the Strait of Yampupata, and I even invited them to visit me in California when I learned that they planned to travel north through South America and Central America, and then on to North America later in the year. I gave them my address and phone number, but I never heard from them again.

Nevertheless, we continued to enjoy each other’s company after the boat stopped at the ruins of Pilcocaina (also spelled Pilco Kayma) to drop off several passengers, and to pick up an indigenous person who was actually a tour guide. This tour guide – I think his name was Enrique – convinced us, along with Elihu and Michel, to let him guide us

on a short two kilometers walk from Yumani to the ruins of Pilcocaina. He would tell us about the island and about the ruins. We agreed on a group price – the guide convinced us it would be cheaper to split the cost four ways.

The tour guide had momentarily distracted our attention from the scenic view around us. I noticed that the small Isla de la Luna (Island of the Moon) and the gorgeous Cordillera Real (Royal Range) had come into full view after the boat left the ruins of Pilcocaina. We were told that Isla de la Luna resembled a whale. And we were informed that the Cordillera Real stretched from the northern peak of Illampu near Sorata – with the Condoriri Massif (a complex of 13 peaks) and Huayna Potosi in the central part – to the southern peak of Illimani near La Paz. To me, they looked like a necklace of white pearls hanging above the dark blue waters of Lake Titicaca, the place of creation.



When the boat landed at the main village of Yumani, we disembarked with our luggage. We were welcomed to the Island of the Sun by two colorful greater-than-lifesize representations of Manco Capac and Mama Ocllo, the original children of the sun who were sent to Lake Titicaca by Viracocha. These were the legendary founders of the Inca lineage, the people who came to be known as the children of the sun. Manco Capac stood to the left of the staircase that ascended to the village, and Mama Ocllo stood on a rock pedestal to the right. Manco Capac, the first ruler of the Inca ruling class, was dressed in a green tunic, with the design of a sun on his chest and an inverted three-stepped chakana design below his waist; an orange royal knee-length cape was draped around his shoulders, and in his right hand he held aloft the royal scepter of the sun-god (also known as the golden staff, “tapac-yauri”). Mama Ocllo wore a long yellow-orange dress with rain and mountain imagery and an inverted three-stepped chakana, signifying she was also a ruler of the three worlds in the Andean cosmos; a hip-length blue-violet cape hung on her back; and her hands were outstretched to welcome all.



Below the statue of Manco Capac was the Fountain of the Incas (Fuente del Incas), which carried water from a natural spring down to the bottom of the staircase, and out to the lake. This was the water of life for all the islanders and the tourists/pilgrims. The local people descended along a path to the fountain daily to fill large water containers and then load them onto donkeys for the trip up to the village. This was the only water source for the village of Yumani. The water flowed out of three spouts, which represented purification, life and youth; or love, health, and eternal youth; or the three levels of the Andean cosmos (celestial, condor; earth, puma; underworld, snake).

We started climbing up the original stone steps of the long stairway. Someone said they were Inca steps, and someone else said they were there before the Inca came. Nevertheless, it was grueling work to trudge up more than 200 steps to the top, where a footpath led the rest of the way to the first inn (or hostel). We decided that was where we would stay. We didn't want to carry our stuff any further. We were totally out of breath. The thin air and the high altitude was something that even I, with my yoga deep breathing, could not overcome. The guide offered me some muna leaves that he picked from a nearby shrub to help with my respiration. The minty scent and flavor invigorated me, and I chewed the freshly picked leaves from the branch like later I would chew coca leaves on the Inka Trail for the same effect.

We rejoined our Israeli friends for our guided walk to the Pilcocaina ruins. Enrique told us our luggage would be safe and secure in the room of the hostel where we left them.

As we started walking on the trail, we were accosted by two Aymara children who were trying to earn some money by selling souvenirs. Their faces were chapped by the sun. They looked like miniature versions of Manco Capac and Mama Ocllo. I couldn't resist their importuning voices, so I bought what looked like a woven friendship bracelet from the girl. However, the long triple-striped red-yellow-green thing that I bought actually turned out to be a headband. It had the Aymara (and Inca) basic principles of life woven in white letters: Ama Sua, Ama Llulla, Ama Kella (Don't lie, don't steal, don't be lazy). The boy was disappointed that I didn't buy anything from him, so I

bought something small from him, too. I had a picture taken with the present-day children of the sun. That was worth a lot to me.



“According to our Andean traditions,” said our guide as we walked on the trail, “the sun and the moon rose into the sky from these two islands, which we call Titikaka and Koati. There is a large rock formation or bedrock called the Sacred Rock, which is located on the northern end of this island. According to legend, this is where the sun emerged like from the womb of the earth mother. The Sacred Rock (or Rock of the Sun) is said to have the shape of a puma, and in the Aymara language Titikala – another form of Titikaka – means gray puma. Some people say Lake Titicaca looks like a puma chasing a rabbit. The puma represents our present life on earth – the middle level between the celestial world above and the underworld below.”

Our guide pointed out the andenes, the garden-bed terraces, on the slopes to the right. He told us about the crops that were raised on the ancient grounds: potatoes, oca (edible tubers), quinoa (grain), haba beans, and some maize. He informed us that the donkeys did the heavy work for the indigenous people, while sheep, fowl, and guinea-pigs (called conejo, “rabbit,” in Bolivia) provided the meat. I was particularly glad that he kept showing me the small leaved deciduous muna shrub (*minthostachys setosa*) that grew along the trail. I kept chewing the leaves as I happily strolled on the path and enjoyed the view and the informative talk our guide was giving us.

We eventually reached the ancient ruin, which stood on a small partially-leveled section about 20 meters (65 feet) above a cliff that overlooked a crescent-shaped bay. The horizontal lines of the andenes (terraces) traversed the steep slope behind the nearly square building.

“When the creator-god Viracocha made the sun and moon rise from these islands, or from the lake, he brought into existence the dawning of a new day,” said the guide as we stood looking at the sacred ruins that were the center of a pilgrimage site from ancient times. “This was considered to be a time when the new human race came into existence, with the light of the sun, moon, and stars paving the path for a new civilization. The age-old name for the lake and the island (Titikaka) is Winay Marka, the Eternal City, or Eternal Homeland of the people. This is where the Incas or children of the sun had their place of origin. The Quechua name is Pakarina, place of emergence (or place of origin).

“So from ancient times, even before the Incas, the people used to stand here, and at other sacred places on the islands, and look at the lake and call her Mama Cocha, or the Mother of the Lake. Since water was sacred from all eternity, the spirit of all lakes and seas was called Pachamama. So the people thought of this lake as the womb of Pachamama, for she was the female essence of the earth that gives birth to life, including human life. So you can imagine that when they built this temple of the sun, or Pilko Kayma as it is called today, they were establishing a place where the place of the sun (Isla del Sol) gazed over the waters at the place of the moon (Isla de la Luna), the solar masculine looking at the lunar feminine. Simultaneously, they were able to see the sacred mountains, the Cordillera Real, in the distance; these were the achachilas or apus, the home of the ancestors and male nature spirits that interacted with the female nature spirits of the lake. So, you see, the entire landscape was sacred to the ancient people, and the stories and legends reflected their understanding of the spirit world and the nature world.”

The guide led us into the building through the east-facing façade which had two large entryways. He led us through the maze-like interior: through two nearly symmetrical double chambers on the east side, and through the two north and south chambers of four interconnected rooms each. The exterior doorways and niches were capped with the three-step chakana design, which we had seen in Tiwanaku and elsewhere in the Andean world. The trapezoidal doors of the Inca architectural style were probably a later addition. The second story was built into the slope behind the building. It was poorly preserved, but there was evidence that the floor was built of the same green stone (andesite) that was found at the Sacred Rock site. The green andesite stones, as the archaeologists discovered, came from the Copacabana peninsula (across from the Island of the Sun).

When the short tour was over, we stood looking at the Island of the Moon, which was about eight kilometers (five miles) away, and we gazed at the distant snowy peaks, which the Aymara called Achachilas (guardian spirits or “grandfathers”).



We said goodbye to our Israeli friends as they descended the steep stairs to the boat that was waiting for them at the small dock. They were heading to the northern part of the island, where they would stay at the village of Challapampa, not far from the sacred rock of Titikala (“gray puma”). We headed back to the village of Yumani to take a much needed rest in our second story room without heat.

By evening, when the sun was starting to set, we walked up the cobblestone street in search of a place to eat. We discovered at least half-a-dozen small restaurants that catered to the tourists. We settled on a small family-run restaurant that had the selection of food that Susie wanted. A young Canadian woman and a young adventurous Swiss man were the only people with us in the restaurant. A middle-aged indigenous woman took our orders, and then she ran next door to recruit all the help she could find. She was the waitress and the cook, and she needed some help peeling the potatoes and preparing the meals. A boy was sent down to a small store for some supplies. Within half-an-hour, a meal arrived on our table. It was delicious.

When we stepped out of the restaurant, it was pitch-black outside. There were no street lights. I was glad I had brought my flashlight. We slowly walked down the uneven street of odd-shaped cobblestones, following the light of a single flashlight back to our hostel, which was at the end of the main village street.

It was very cold that night. At 12,500 feet (3811 meters) above sea level, we could feel the crisp, cold highland air right down to our bones. We slept completely clothed in three layers of clothes under two warm blankets, and it was still cold. Susie did not like the cold. She started to realize that it would be just as cold when we would hike the Inka Trail for four days and sleep in tents.

“Dad, I don’t think I’ll be able to do the Inka Trail,” said Susie in a plaintive voice.

“Why not?” I asked. “Your foot is healed and you’re walking without pain, aren’t you?”

“That’s not it,” said Susie. “I don’t think I can handle the cold. You’ll have to go without me.”

“Susie, you know I can’t go without you,” I said, realizing that I might have to sacrifice the Inka Trail for the sake of my daughter’s well being.

“Yes, you can,” said Susie. “I’ll find something to do in Cusco while you go. You’ve been looking forward to doing the Inka Trail for a long time.”

“Susie, I won’t leave you alone,” I said firmly. “If you can’t go, I won’t go either.”

We didn’t say much after that, and we tried to block out the cold by going to sleep. I hoped and prayed that Susie would be able to do the Inka Trail. I really didn’t want to go without her.

In the morning, after some hot muna tea, we felt much better. I watched the sun come up over the snowy peaks of the Cordillera Real, and I marveled as the sun’s light danced on the shimmering waves of Lake Titicaca. We had a beautiful view of the dawning of a new day, just as it must have appeared to countless of generations that lived on the Island of the Sun.

By mid-morning, we had watched dozens of donkeys carrying large plastic containers of water on their backs up the cobblestone street to the homes, hostels, and restaurants. The entire morning seemed to be an endless drudgery for the donkeys and the Aymara women who were in charge of getting the water from the Fountain of the Incas at the bottom of the hill. Sometimes the load would slip and slide from the back of a donkey, and the women would have to stop the caravan and retie the load onto the back of the patient donkey.



By noon, the sun had warmed up the island and the surrounding alpine air, and we felt ready to explore the island. We followed the main village cobblestone street to the outlying area. Along the way we saw the sights and sounds of village life. One interesting sight was a llama family of a father, mother, and baby llama being led by a

boy and controlled from the rear by an Aymara woman dressed in her colorful traditional clothing of long dress, full-length apron, and a keperina (or manta) for carrying the baby on her back. A wide-brimmed straw hat adorned the woman's head and protected her face from the glaring noonday sun. The black baby llama was so cute. It seemed to be just as curious about us as we were about it.



As we followed the trail up the slope to the hill overlooking the village and the rest of the island, we saw the young Canadian lady scurrying back down the trail towards us. She stopped to talk to us.

“I just saw three large condors flying over my head,” she said in a fearful voice. “I thought they were coming to get me.”

“That must be a sign that you were blessed by the spirits of the upper world,” I said, trying to reassure her there was nothing to be afraid of. “The condor, after all, represents the upper, celestial world in the Aymara worldview.”

We found out from the young lady, whose name was Hillary, that she was traveling alone, and she had met the young Swiss man only last night. He wanted to tell her all about his quest to find the right shaman in South America, and she was willing to listen to his adventures. Hillary's cheeks were already red from the exposure to the sun. She was not wearing any protective headgear.

I saw our meeting with the Canadian lady as an opportune moment to have a picture of Susie and me taken against the picturesque backdrop of the natural scenery painted by the creator's hand. The Island of the Moon and the Cordillera Real were vivid and clear in the light of the noonday sun, and the water of the blue lake was smooth and placid. I was wearing my psychedelic Huichol T-shirt with the sun-moon design on it, symbolizing the solar-lunar polarities united in one being. That was how I felt – standing on the Island of the Sun with the Island of the Moon at my back – united with the masculine-feminine energies of the sacred Lake Titicaca and the place of creation.



Susie and I proceeded to climb the hill named Palla Khasa, which was about 800 feet (244 m) above the lake. At an elevation of 4065 meters (13,336 feet) above sea level, Palla Khasa was the second highest point on the Island of the Sun. When we got to the top, it was a view that was absolutely awesome and overwhelming. We could see the entire island. The 360 degree view gave us a perspective of the picturesque island – with its bays, inlets, promontories, and summits – that was beyond words. It was as if we were standing on top of the world. To the southeast we could see the Yumani village with the terraced hill Cerro Kenwani behind it. Beyond that was the small tree-covered islet named Chelleka and the Strait of Yampupata. We could even see the Copacabana peninsula and the hills surrounding Copacabana.



To the northwest we could see the other smaller summits – and the many bays – of the island that looked like an elongated toad, according to the indigenous accounts. This was the center of the world – the Pakarina, the place of emergence (or origin). It was an awe-inspiring concept that boggled the mind.

When I had completed my panoramic survey of the land and the lake, I turned my attention to a curious looking pile of stones that resembled a cairn or a stone pillar. It was located on the edge of the hill overlooking the lake toward the eastern Andes. A rectangular ceremonial rock was in front of the man-made structure, with broken pottery pieces nearby. The stone pillar had a cave-like opening (or doorway) that made it appear to be a hearth with a chimney, or a portal to another world. However, I recalled that piles of stones were set up on hilltops, mountain passes, peaks, and other sacred places

to honor Pachamama. These apachetas – as they were called – meant “the source from where the flow begins.” They were created by travelers who brought a stone to the top of the hill as a token of one’s respect to the huaca (sacred site) and as a prayer to the gods for luck and protection during one’s travels. Each stone was a prayer, offering, or sacrifice, representing a connection with the creative source of all life. The cumulative effect of all the stones was a tower-like structure that represented the wishes and prayers of all the people, making it an outdoor temple to the sun. I added a small stone to the apacheta, signifying that I was a small part of the male-female (positive-negative) aspects of the communal shrine. It was also my way of recognizing the Aymara belief that each location has a spirit called a little Pachamama, or a part of Mother Earth. Finally, I said a silent meditative prayer of thanks for making it to this sacred place, the Island of the Sun, for surely it was Pachamama who carried me to this place.



When I looked for a trail to the north end of the island, I noticed the main path following the contour of the rounded hill of Kalla Khasa. We zigzagged down the hill through the terraced slopes to rejoin the main path. We arrived at a control point where a man and a boy stopped us and asked for a small fee to cross into the northern section of the island. The boy’s name was John, and he knew enough English to provide us with an interesting conversation.

“We didn’t know we had to pay a fee on this trail,” I said, thinking that they were taking advantage of the tourists.

“It’s only 10 Bolivianos,” said John. “For you Americans, that’s only \$1.50. That’s not much. We have to make a living, you know.”

“Can I take a picture of you and my daughter for that fee?” I bargained.

“For you, I’ll throw that in as a bonus,” said the witty boy.

“Where did you learn to speak English?” asked Susie.

“I go to school,” replied John, “but mostly I learn from talking to tourists like you.”

I gave John the 20 Bolivianos that were required, and I took a picture of Susie with the young entrepreneur overlooking the Bay of Kona. Then we crossed over into the lands of the Challa community. Soon we were able to see the Challa village nestled beneath a terraced hill. We followed the old pre-Inca road (or main path) for a while along a barren ridgeline. Then Susie decided she didn’t want to walk any longer. Her foot was still giving her some trouble from time to time.



So we turned back. I wouldn’t get to see the Sacred Rock this time around. It seemed that there were always a few things that were left undone, and a few places left unseen, just so that there would be a reason to come back again. This was definitely one of those places that I would want to visit again.

On the way back, we stopped at the first restaurant we saw for a snack and a cup of our favorite muna tea. We watched an older woman tending a herd of sheep on a nearby hillside. Every so often she would toss a stone at a sheep to control its movements. The rest of the time she sat and watched. Behind the restaurant, at the edge of a hill, I noticed another apacheta (pile of stones). It looked like it could have been a local huaca (shrine), or it could have been a chullpa (burial place).



After our relaxing tea time, we strolled back towards the village, enjoying the afternoon sunshine and fantastic scenery all around. As we passed another restaurant, a local Aymara girl approached us and asked if we wanted to take a picture of her. It would only cost us 10 Bolivianos. I couldn't resist posing with a girl who was dressed in traditional clothing and had photogenic features. I was also contributing to the local household and to the local economy when I handed the shy Aymara girl the small fee for what I considered to be a colorful picture. In the background was Kona Bay and the elongated ridge of Kakayo-Kena.



Toward evening, everybody was looking for the perfect place to view the sunset, which promised to be very bright against the clear blue sky. We met a group of college students from Atlanta, Georgia, and we chatted with them while we waited for the sun to descend. We thought of going up to the summit of Palla Khasa, again. But I soon realized that the sun would be setting behind the highest summit on the ridge to the west. The highest summit, Chequesani, was only 11 meters (36 feet) taller than Palla Khasa, but it would still obstruct our view of the sunset. We would not be able to see the sun sinking into the waters of Lake Titicaca, where on the first day of creation the sun had risen from those same azure waters. Instead, we had to be content with the sight of the bright sun spreading its warm rays on us as it began to hide its face to the right of the highest summit. It seemed to be setting in the direction of the Sacred Rock.

Just as the sun was setting, a wondrous event transpired right before our eyes – the sheep were coming home after a day of grazing on the hillsides. The shepherdess, an older Aymara woman, was herding the sheep along the trail toward their destination. We stepped aside to watch the baby sheep move right along with the bigger sheep.

Susie picked up one of the baby lambs that had a black face and black legs, with a small crown of white fleece on top of its head. Susie identified herself with “the black sheep in the family,” although her rebel nature and nonconformist character hardly qualified her – in my eyes – as a black sheep. She was simply an individualist.



That evening we found another restaurant to eat at. There was a painting of the map of Isla del Sol on the wall. I spent some time studying the map-painting. It had a legend (key) with listings of the prominent places (symbolized by alphabetical letters A-R). The artist had listed the places in Spanish: A-Templo del Sol (Pilco Kayma), B-Escalera del Inca (Fuente), N-Roca Sagrada (Mesa del Inca), etc. In the upper right-hand corner was a small – but very significant – drawing of the children of the sun, Manco Capac and Mama Ocllo, arriving from the celestial heights with the solar orb leading the way. Somehow, I felt that the Sun (Light) was the essence of where all life, including the children of the sun (Incas), had originated. By coming to Lake Titicaca, I not only had completed the same pilgrimage that the indigenous people from previous ages had completed, but I also had arrived at the same realization that we were all Children of the Sun.



The following morning at the crack of dawn, I rose up to watch the sunrise. The first rays of the new day shot over the Cordillera Real and across the brightening sky like fiery arrows. The peaks of the Royal Range stood like stone pillars (apachetas), welcoming the enlivening solar beams. The snow-covered Crown of the Andes adorned the head of Father-Sun as he manifested his brilliant face. Lake Titicaca, along with Isla del Sol and Isla de la Luna, awoke from their slumber and shimmered with diamond-like specks of light. I saluted with upraised hands the spirit of the sacred lake (Pachamama), the sacred mountains (Achachilas), the solar being (Inti) and lunar being

(Coati), and the host of human beings who were part of the ongoing Pacarina (emergence of life) on planet Earth.

Susie and I descended the steep Stairway of the Incas by mid-morning for our boat ride back to Copacabana, where we would catch the Vicuna Tours bus for Puno in the afternoon. At the bottom of the stairway, I stopped to fill up my plastic bottle with the refreshing natural spring water from one of the three spouts of the Fuente del Inca, the fountain that to me represented the three-stepped chakana – the three levels or worlds represented by the condor, the puma, and the snake.



While we waited for the pilot of the boat to arrive at the jetty, we took the opportunity to take a picture with the legendary Manco Capac and Mama Ocllo, the Adam and Eve of Inca mythology. Manco Capac (“splendid foundation” or “the Great One”), seemed to be both an archetypal founding hero, who was called the “Son of the Sun,” and the first Inca (ruler), who ruled for 160 years in Cusco, according to Guaman Poma, the native Andean chronicler. Mama Ocllo was a fertility goddess, and she was the coya (queen, sister-wife) of the Inca ruler, Manco Capac. The founding couple seemed to be representatives of the sun and moon on earth, and they also seemed to have originated from the sun and the moon. Their mythic shroud appeared to hide the androgynous nature of man: the male-female dual currents (polarities) that flow in the body, symbolized by the solar ruler (Inti) and the lunar consort (Coati).



Before we boarded the boat for Copacabana, Susie wanted me to take a picture of the mongrel dog who had accompanied us during our sojourn on Isla del Sol. He had followed us on the cobblestone street of Yumani during our first evening walk in the dark, and he had begged for scraps of food. The second evening, I intentionally kept a few scraps from our restaurant food to give the dog, who was waiting for us outside the door. The owner wouldn't let him inside. And now, as we were leaving the island, he had followed us down to the waterfront. The playful dog had taken a liking to Susie.



The ride back to Copacabana in the long, narrow overloaded boat was precarious – from my point of view. I was sitting in the front of the boat on the wooden bench that encircled the inner compartment of the boat. I was looking towards the back, where the man steering the motorized boat was sitting. I kept seeing the water almost level with the rear of the boat, and the waves formed by the motor looked like they were about to climb into the boat. Even the man steering the single outboard motor was looking at the water activity below him. The hour long ride back to Copacabana seemed to last an eternity as I kept thinking of a plan of escape in case the boat started to take on water. Susie laughed at my illogical premonitions. Needless to say, we arrived safe and sound on the sandy shores of the small town of Copacabana.

We left our luggage, as before, at the small Vicuna Tours bus office. We had over an hour to find a restaurant and enjoy a meal. We passed by one place that had a large mural of a syncretic scene of Copacabana: at the foot of Cerro Calvario an indigenous priest was presenting an offering while an Aymara woman wearing a bowler hat was lovingly looking on; at the center of the mural was the basilica and Virgin of Copacabana with a white Holy Spirit bird hovering over her head, and at her left side was the bare-chested Divine Child (El Nino) with an eight-rayed sun face above his head; in front of the Virgin and Child were musicians with a drum and Andean pan flute, and a female dancer; stylized animal designs formed the foreground, and the blue waves of Lake Titicaca formed the backdrop.

There was another mural that I encountered. It was at the restaurant where we had our lunch. I sat and faced the idyllic scene of the lake and the mountains as I ate lunch.

The sun rising over the snow-capped Andes and the lake reminded me of the Edenic scene I had witnessed in the morning. There was a man in a reed boat on the lake, and it looked like there was a small floating reed island with huts made out of reeds on it. That was where we were headed to next – the Uros Floating Islands near Puno.



There was one obligatory stop on our three hour bus trip to Puno – the border crossing at Kasani. We had to get off the bus and walk to the Bolivian border control to get our exit stamp; then we walked under the archway into Peru and got our entry stamp at the Peruvian border control.



When we got settled into the Camino Real Turistico Hotel in Puno, we first made reservations with Inka Tours for the next day's trip to the Uros Floating Islands, and then we set out to discover the city of Puno, "the folkloric capital of Peru."

https://www.peruadventurestours.com/en/puno/uros_taquile.html

We happened to see why Puno had a reputation for its folklore culture when we chanced upon a procession coming down the street. The band was playing, the drums were thundering, and an excited crowd lined the street to watch an image of the Virgin carried upon pious shoulders. I thought it might be the Virgin of Candelaria, the patron saint of the city of Puno. Her sanctuary was in the San Juan Bautista church, in the center of the city, and she was believed to have saved the city from an Inca uprising by Tupac Amaru II in 1781. Even though the Virgin of Candelaria's festival was held in February, it seemed that any day was a good day to honor the Virgin (and Pachamama).

We followed the procession for several blocks as the statue, the musicians, and the people snaked through the city in festive manner.

Later that evening we feasted at Lago de Flores (Lake of Flowers), a restaurant that featured unique Andean food. There was a notable wood-burning oven in the dining area, and I was curious to find out how a pizza cooked in that oven would turn out. So I ordered a quinoa pizza. Susie ordered ensalada de espinacas con manzana (spinach salad with apples). I also ordered mate de coca (coca tea) to help relieve altitude sickness. Susie found a special drink on the menu called huajsapata, named after the local hill where a statue of Manco Capac stood. The drink was a warm mulled wine (pisco, “little bird” in Quechua), and it was flavored with grenadine, orange bitters, spices, and a bit of orange peel. The waiter informed Susie that huajsapata meant “witness of my love.” The pizza was delicious, the salad was good, and the drinks were served exactly to our liking. We enjoyed the warm ambiance and the nice, long, leisurely meal.

Everything was going perfectly fine until later that night, when Susie came running up to the hotel room with the manager.

“Dad, did you see my bag?” she asked when I opened the door in response to her hard knocking.

“No, you had it with you when I left you at the internet café,” I answered.

“That bastard,” exclaimed Susie in a disgusted voice. “He must have stolen it right from under the chair.”

“What happened?” I inquired. “You were sitting there at the computer, and you’re saying someone stole your bag while you were sitting there?”

“I think I got up for a second or two,” said Susie, trying to recreate the scene that distressed her mind. “I went to the front desk to tell the lady there that I needed more time added to my session.”

“Oh, my gosh,” I said, realizing that I had uploaded some pictures to my web page and posted them for people to see, and then Susie wanted to post some pictures on Facebook, so I had left my camera with her. “The guy stole the camera, too.”

“Yes,” admitted Susie, seeing the disappointment on my face.

Lucky for Susie, she didn’t carry her passport with her, so she was just missing a few personal things. It was the camera that was the biggest loss. I wouldn’t be able to

take any more pictures. I wasn't about to buy an expensive camera in a foreign land. I would have to take mental pictures and try to live with that. That was something my son had tried to teach me to do for a long time. Now I had an opportunity to "kick the habit" of depending on the camera to serve as my memory.

In the morning, we tried to put the events of the previous night behind us as we boarded the boat for the Uros Floating Islands. The refreshing morning air cleared our heads, and the blue water of Lake Titicaca was a welcoming sight. The boat left the city of Puno behind and steered towards the narrow channel between the totora reeds that formed several kilometers from shore. We were entering Lake Titicaca National Reserve, created in 1978 to protect the wetland area surrounding the floating islands, along with the flora and fauna of the region.

We passed a small island where the pigs lived separate from the inhabitants of the floating islands. They were poking their snouts into the top layer of dry reeds for scraps of food and edible roots.



An artistic reed-like structure was created on a flat surface that looked like a causeway. The interlocking dualistic-shaped symmetry of the four arches created a circular shadow on the western side as the morning sun cast its light on the formation. I thought it might be a creative sundial, or a welcoming sign.



Five kilometers east of the Puno harbor, we caught our first glimpse of the vast network of reed islands, reed buildings, and reed boats that captivated the attention of tourists from around the world. Forty-two self-fashioned islands stretched out on both sides of a wide channel of water that served as a water highway for the community of Aymara Uros people. Each island of homes and people floated on a large bed of interwoven and layered totora reeds, and the entire island of layered reeds and dense roots (about one to two meters thick) was anchored with ropes tied to sticks secured at the bottom of the lake.

The floating islands varied in size. The boat slowly passed one island that seemed to have about eight or nine huts that served as living quarters for a community of families. A billboard advertised the name of the small community. A small area, with long round benches made from reeds, was created especially for tourists and visitors. That was like the living room. The island appeared to be at least 100 feet wide.



As we approached another floating island, we heard the sweet voices of the indigenous women singing a welcome song to the tourists. The women wore uniform traditional clothing, with blue wool sweaters and red skirts, and they were lined up on the edge of their island with hands extended in welcome. I recalled the image of Mama Oollo on the Island of the Sun with her hands extended in welcome.

We slowed down as we passed the community named Titi Marka (“Puma community”), which had a reed boat with the figurehead of a puma parked in front along the edge – a reference to the puma-shaped Sacred Rock of the Island of the Sun that was the mystical center of creation at Lake Titicaca. And the Uros, who called themselves Kotsuna (“lake people”), created a homeland for themselves right on the sacred lake of origin, which some people said was over a million years old.



We stopped at the island community where our boat was scheduled to land. From our boat we could see a lot of activity on the island: two men were tying the main body (hull) of the cylindrical-shaped roll (chorizo) of totora with rope; a boy was standing on the two large bundles that formed the main body, and he was holding a rope tight to keep the two ends of the reed boat curved inward; a man on the ground was tying a fresh smaller spindle-shaped bundle for another boat, and he would join two or more of those bundles to make the larger sausage-shaped roll (chorizo); and a woman near our boat was getting ready to secure the line from the boat to a post on the island.

Before we disembarked, I took a closer look at the fish pond in the center of the village-island. I was told that trout was introduced into the lake in 1939. However, the native fish was the small killifish, and a type of catfish (Mauri) also flourished in the lake. The fishermen would also fish for carachi and ispi, and some kingfish, and they would keep the live fish in the fish pond for later use.



As we stepped on the reed shore of the floating island, we were greeted with a friendly “Kamisaraki” (hello, how are you), to which we were taught to reply with “Waliki” (fine, thanks).

Our guide Juan directed us to sit around in a semi-circle on the long round benches made of reeds. He used a long reed pointer to point out the details on the beautifully painted board showing Lago Titikaka and the name of the Isla Flotante Uros (Floating

Island of Uros) that we were on – Manco Capac. It seemed that the legendary founder of the Inca civilization was everywhere, especially around Lake Titicaca, where Manco Capac emerged with his sister-wife Mama Ocllo. The map-painting had some general information about the lake that I had not seen before: the surface area was 8560 sq km (3305 sq mi), and the water volume was 896 cu km (215 cubic miles). The average temperature, which Susie noticed right away, was 9 degrees Celsius (48 degrees Fahrenheit).

While Juan talked about the floating island, the Aymara Uros people worked on their individual skills: a heavy-set man in a rainbow-colored chullo hat was preparing some young green reeds, which looked like long green onions (or scallions), for the tourists to taste; and two women in colorful turquoise jackets and orange dresses were doing chain stitch embroidery with a hollow sewing needle on a predesigned black-outlined pattern, filling in the spaces with bright colored wool yarn.

The man passed the green reeds around to each tourist sitting on the round reed bench. He told us – through the guide, who interpreted his words – that the totora reed was part of their staple food, and it was also their medicine. Some of the tourists thought the white part of the reed (called the chullo) tasted like celery; I thought it tasted like soft asparagus. Susie thought there was a cucumber flavor in the soft chewy part.



Afterwards, the man demonstrated how the men would create a floating island from pieces called Khili – a mixture of the interwoven roots of the reed and mud. They would cut sections of Khili, tie them together with anchors to form a large platform, and cover them with fresh crisscrossed layers of reeds. They would tie their island to another island to keep them together so they wouldn't float away. In total there were about thirteen anchors around the island connecting the platforms to the bottom of the lake. Then the man demonstrated how they could move their sturdy reed houses from the old, rotting away island, to the new island. They would move their stoves, which they placed on rocks, and all their belongings, including their family. Generally speaking, the new island would last about twenty to thirty years before the Khili would

decompose and another island would need to be built. Each generation needed to learn how to build an island, otherwise their way of life would collapse.

We were allowed to walk around the small island after the presentation. I felt like I was walking on a bouncy trampoline or on a mattress that was lying on a water bed. This was a chance, also, to see the various items on display for sale: miniature reed boats, reed mobiles, bead necklaces, and hand-woven tapestries.



I saw an older woman – I thought she was probably sixty or more – who was sitting in front of her reed hut, selling her handiwork. I liked the single tapestry that she had on display. She said she did the embroidery all by herself.

The rectangular tapestry was about 3 feet x 2 feet, and I knew it was the one for me. It was similar to the tapestry I had seen in Copabacana, but this time I knew for sure that this tapestry, which portrayed life on Lake Titicaca, was created by an indigenous weaver. The tapestry showed several reed huts in a community setting; two women were in a reed boat named Uros; a fisherman in a boat was catching fish in a net; two other women were preparing food in front of a stove; and the three symbolic Andean animals (condor, puma, and snake) were depicted in the center along with a swan and a fish.

After I bought the tapestry from the old woman with wrinkles on her face, she invited me to see the interior of her living space. I felt honored. It was as if I was her special guest, and I was being rewarded for buying the one tapestry she probably had been working on for quite a few days. I looked at the single reed bed that was set on a layer of reeds on the ground, and I noticed the round reed bench on the right side against the wall. I bowed – by lowering my head – to the little Aymara Uros woman who had favored me with her hospitality, and I placed my hands together and softly said, “Thank you, Pachamama.”



As we left the island, I kept thinking of the little old woman, and I recalled the words of the guide, “The Aymara Uros people consider themselves to be the oldest people on earth.” According to legend, the Uros people existed in the dark age before the sun appeared. When the sun was born, they became Lupihaques (“Sons of the Sun”). They learned to live on the lake, and they intermarried with the Aymara people. That is why they are known as the Uros-Aymaras or Aymara Uros people. Now they speak only Aymara.

It seemed that every tour boat ended their trip to the Uros Floating Islands by stopping at the market place on the large floating island. This was where they had a watchtower made mostly of reeds. Climbing the watchtower gave the tourist the best view of all the individual floating islands, and of all the tour boats that were bringing tourists to support the indigenous people who were mostly making a living by entertaining the tourists and selling souvenirs to them. In short, the tourist was helping the Aymara Uros people survive, and thrive.

As we left the Uros Floating Islands, there were lots of reed sculptures, reed huts, and reed boats to look at on our way out the channel – water highway – and lots of mental impressions. One particular reed boat impressed me the most. It was a boat with a double puma figurehead that had seating for tourists on a lower and an upper level. It reminded me that the puma (titi) was the sacred totem animal of the entire Lake Titicaca (or Titicala, “Puma Rock”), the place where the sun (solar puma) arose at the dawn of creation.



The boat was heading now in the direction of the island of Taquile, which was the second part of the full day tour. The two hour boat ride provided us with an extensive view of the lake. Off in the distance to the north we were able to see the island of Amantani with its notable peaks, Pacha Tata (Father) and Pacha Mama (Mother), representing the masculine and feminine energies on earth.

The long boat ride afforded me an opportunity to become familiar with a young German couple who were on their honeymoon. I overheard them speaking German, and I thought I'd see how much I remembered of the language my mother had taught me. They were impressed when I told them, "Ich bin in Deutschland geboren." I told them how I was born in Germany after the war, and I told them how my parents were fleeing Ukraine during the war. Johannes and Hedda spoke English better than I spoke German, my mother tongue. So I switched to speaking English with them. I found out from them that they were also going on the same Inka Express tour to Cusco that we were going on tomorrow. That was a pleasant surprise. However, the biggest surprise for me came after I told them about the camera that was stolen, and Johannes offered to send me pictures via email of the two day trip that we shared. Now I would have the necessary pictures for the book that I intended to write of my pilgrimage.

The 45 kilometers (28 miles) powerboat ride finally drew to a close as the island of Taquile came in sight. The flag of Peru at the front of the boat pointed in the direction of an island that was 6km long and 1.5km wide. The red-white-red equal-sized vertical stripes of the flag symbolized blood sacrificed for freedom (red) and peace (white). At one time in Peru's history, an Incan design of the Sun (Inti) was featured, which I thought was a more appropriate flag for Peru.

As the boat made its way along the shore to its landing place, we saw men and women on the rocky shore doing their laundry. After washing the clothes in the water, they would lay them out on the warm rocks to dry in the sun.



The first people that we saw on the northern part of the island as we disembarked at Alsuno harbor – one of five major harbors – were two men in white blouse-shirts, black pants and vests, a sash around the waist, and chullos on their heads. We were told that the men wore different clothes according to whether they were single or married, and also if they were a prominent person in the village. In other words, you could tell everything you needed to know about a person by the clothes he wore.

It was a slow, steady climb to the principal plaza at the top of the hill. Along the way, we saw lots of agricultural terraces (called “chacra” in the local Quechua language), and we passed lots of small buildings scattered among the chacras (fields).



We entered the principal plaza through what looked like an ancient archway (or gateway). After all, we had heard there were a few ruins, including pre-Inca ruins, on the island.

Lucky for us, lunch was ready when we arrived. We were starved. The restaurant Santiago served us delicious quinoa soup, fried trout straight out of the lake, and muna tea. It seemed that the islands of Lake Titicaca all had an ample supply of muna shrubs. Muna tea was used everywhere as a substitute for coca tea, and it had a similar effect of helping with altitude sickness and with digestion.

After the meal, we were given a little history and culture lesson. Taquile, according to some sources, used to be called Intika (Inti, “sun” and ka, “energy”) before the Spanish changed it to the name Taquile, in honor of Count Rodrigo of Taquila. Although the islanders were forced to adopt the Catholic religion, they continued to honor Pachamama (earth mother), the principal Andean deity, and other deities of nature. Their major festivals, besides the May festival for weddings, were Carnaval de Candelaria in February to celebrate the first harvest and offering of the first fruits to Pachamama, and Carnaval de Taquile in March to celebrate the continuing harvest and prayer for good luck in the future harvest. We were shown a long wedding cloth that was laid on the table; it showed all the symbols of a happy married couple (two love birds) in their new home.



We had some time left to ourselves to shop and browse around the principal plaza. Afterwards, we walked to the other harbor on the western side of the island. We had to descend about 540 stairs to get to Chilcano harbor. Fortunately, we did not have to climb those stairs like the other group that arrived before us. It was easier going down, than up.



The sun was starting to go down when the powerboat made its way through the sea of reeds. The totora reeds (*schoenplectus totora*) were so plentiful, that the Uros floating islands were assured of a long existence.



The boat had to make a stop at one of the floating islands, so we were fortunate enough to see a few things we had not seen before. A condor on stilts was raised above one of the floating villages. I wondered if the people living in that village were shamans, who soared into the heights of the upper worlds.

The village that we stopped at was named Tata Inti (“Father Sun”). That was a good name for the Andean civilizations (Inca, Pukara, Colla, and others) that understood solar energy to be the driving force, power, and spirit behind our life on earth.



When our tour finally ended – and we came back to where we started from – the sky and the lake lit up with all the gorgeous sunset colors that made the soul glad that it had journeyed through the land that the Children of the Sun called home.



Bienvenidos a La Sagrada Isla del Sol

Comunidad Yurani Originaria Cultural del Lago Titikaka
Maravilla Natural del Mundo Parte Sur
R. Prefectural N° 033/98 • R. Municipal N° 065/97

- Derecho a Visitar a Secciones atractivos Turísticos
- Para Servicios Comunitarios
- Aseo general para conservar el medio Ambiente sin Contaminación

N° 005088



Agradecemos su visita, su cooperación y Solidaridad con la comunidad Originaria Cultural y Agraria Misionera

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SERVICIOS	SS	HORA	FECHA	CUENTA
UROS (3H.) INCLUYE TRASLADO, GUIA, TICKETS DE INGRESOS EMBARCACIÓN	<input type="checkbox"/>	8:45 - 9:00 a.m.	...	
UROS - TAQUILE (1DIA.) INCLUYE TRASLADO, GUIA, TICKETS DE INGRESOS EMBARCACIÓN	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	6:45 - 7:00 a.m.	07.06.02	
UROS - AMANTANI - TAQUILE (2DIA.) INCLUYE TRASLADO, GUIA, TICKETS DE INGRESOS EMBARCACIÓN, ALIMENTACIÓN Y HOSPEDAJE EN AMANTANI	<input type="checkbox"/>	7:45 - 8:00 a.m.	...	
SILLUSTANI (3 H.) INCLUYE TRASLADO, GUIA, TICKET DE INGRESO	<input type="checkbox"/>	2:00 - 2:15 p.m.	...	
NOTA: ESTE CUPÓN DEBERÁ SER CANJEO POR BOLETA DE VENTA Y/O FACTURA AL TÉRMINO DEL SERVICIO				

EMISOR: JUAN D
PL 95152276

CUPÓN VÁLIDO SOLO SERVICIOS EN PUNO