Island hopping on Lake Titicaca

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By Anne Georg for The Calgary Herald August 16, 2007

Sitting on a cliff overlooking Lake Titicaca in Copacabana, Bolivia, I reflect on the lake's majesty and marvel at my own small experience of it.

I have travelled by boat on a puddle-sized portion of its 8,000-square-kilometre surface, admiring big- sky views almost 4,000 metres above sea level. I have visited four of its 41 islands, mingling with indigenous locals and walking on pathways traversed for millennia by their ancestors.

Lake Titicaca is the world's highest, commercially navigable lake. But that's not what drew me to its shores. As a child I traced the outline of Lake Titicaca from atlases through thin airmail writing paper, daydreaming about vague, but compelling adventure. Decades later, I was fired from my dream job, I broke up with my longtime boyfriend and while I was running away from home, I stumbled upon my childhood dream and found refuge on Lake Titicaca.

My sojourn on the lake began badly. I'd been had by Yvonna, my unscrupulous tour operator, an odious young woman with a big smile and bad teeth. She acted confused when I confronted her about the money she owed me. She stalled until I had to get on the boat empty handed, but relieved to leave behind the polluted harbour and her deceit.

Soon, we were on the open lake surrounded by totora reeds synonymous with Lake Titicaca. The reeds define the Uros people, who use them to build floating islands. As many as 30 families can live on an island, which they anchor to the lake floor with poles. The Uros also use the reeds to build boats and homes; and they eat the tender stems.

Originally, the Uros lived further out into the lake for defence against invaders; and they subsisted on fishing. For easier access to the tourist dollar, the Uros lifted anchor and a flotilla of islands re-located closer to Puno.

That's where we disembarked on the spongy reed surface. Stout, vibrantly dressed Uros women, keen to sell us their reed crafts, greeted us. I forgot about my hassles and haggled with them.

With about 12 squat reed huts, the island is one of the smaller ones. It used to be twice as big, but the locals implemented radical surgical separatism when irreconcilable religious differences arose: They cut the island in half and each floated their separate way.

Other islands also take matters into their own hands. On the island of Amantani, the Ayamara locals don't have dogs or need police. They keep order by honouring the three golden rules of the Inca: ama suwa, ama quella, ama llulla (do not steal, do not be idle, do not lie). Those who transgress risk banishment.

When we landed on the barren 15-square-kilometre island, we were greeted by a gaggle of traditionally dressed women who would lodge us for the night, as there are no hotels. We followed them down footpaths to their respective homes.

Walking is the only mode of transportation on Lake Titicaca's islands and on Amantani, the locals shun beasts of burden, hauling everything on their backs.

I sat in the dirt-floored, smoke-filled kitchen as my family's weathered matriarch, Juana, prepared vegetarian meals on a wood stove.

Like all of the lean islanders, my host family ekes out their subsistence on a small plot of land, using hand tools to grow beans, quinoa, potatoes and corn.

The small tourist trade and money sent home from a family member employed off the island, is helping them build a new concrete home. For now, three generations live together in a tight compound in wooden houses built on stilts.

After my evening meal of quinoa soup, Juana came into my room carrying a traditional women's outfit, which she insisted I wear. I feigned confusion, like my nemesis, Yvonna, but Juana's dogged determination gave me little room for escape.

Under her gaze, I donned the full red woolen skirt, purple cotton petticoat, long-sleeved cotton blouse and a bright woven sash that Juana wound tightly around my waist. She nodded, satisfied with her work and beckoned me to follow her under the star-laden sky down a network of long-established footpaths.

I was at the whim of poker-faced, quick-paced Juana. Helplessly lost, stumbling in the dark, I questioned the wisdom of coming to this remote corner of the world. First, I'd been taken by Yvonna and now I was on this unsettling march with Juana -- with no police or taxis to rescue me.

Eventually, we arrived at a community hall where the locals were throwing an Andean dance party for their visitors. I walked into the hall, black wool scarf covering my face only to see my companions sitting on benches around the hall, looking equally as sheepish as me in their Ayamara costumes.

On the neighbouring island of Taquile, handsome Quechua men dress more elaborately than the women, which is unusual.

They are also renowned knitters; even their marriage prospects depend on their talent.

We met several men dressed in their Sunday best on the path into town, knitting the typical Andean toque called a chulo while they socialized and walked. Taquile is famous for its textile industry and a market in town sells the men's knitting and the women's weaving.

The fertile island had a crisp, clean feel to it. Modest adobe homes boast beautiful flower gardens and tidy terraces yield abundant high-altitude crops.

Going back to Puno, I felt like I was leaving simplicity behind me and I braced for my encounter with the foul-breathed Yvonna. She was conspicuously absent from the hotel and wasn't answering the repeated calls I made to her cellphone.

Finally I left a message with empty threats to call the tourist commission and boarded the bus that took me over the quiet Peru-Bolivia border to Copacabana. My surliness evaporated in the lakeside town of colourful low-rise hotels and good eateries and cafes.

Legions of paddleboats in the harbour testified that Copacabana is a beach resort for landlocked Bolivians. More recently, new-generation hippies from around the globe have moved in. They line the street to the harbour, selling jewelry displayed on bolts of cloth spread out on the ground.

And there's the navy.

Around dawn the next morning I awoke to military calls from a squadron of Bolivian sailors doing exercises on the shore. Copacabana's status as a naval station underlines Bolivia's continuing and frustrated efforts to take back the corridor linking Bolivia to the Pacific Ocean that Chile won in a war 128 years ago.

From this idyllic shore under a heavy morning sky, I caught a boat for Isla del Sol (Island of the Sun). Below, in the crowded passenger deck, drips of rainwater became streams that flowed over the shoulders and onto the laps of the passengers. Figuring I'd be just as wet outside, I climbed onto the roof to watch the immense, changing sky. By the time we reached Isla del Sol, its namesake had broken through.

Legend has it that the Inca sun god arose from Isla del Sol and founded the Inca Empire. And scientists have discovered evidence that the island was inhabited as far back as 300 BC. What remains are about 180 ruins scattered about the hilly, terraced island that testify to ancient lives lived and imbue the area with mythical resonance.

Merciless in its precision, the sacrificial table that stands on a cliff on the island's north side overlooks exquisite views of the lake. It is made of a slab of smooth, chiselled rock and is positioned perfectly to capture shadows on significant dates during the year. Beside the sacrificial table are the ruins of a labyrinth-like temple with windows placed to look through other windows revealing lake views and exposing approaching enemies.

The Inca didn't have a written language, so much of what is "known" about their life is speculation. According to my guide, the most beautiful girls were taken from their families to be schooled in the fine arts of the Inca culture. At 15, they were brought to Isla del Sol where holy men in the temple blessed and drugged the girls before leading them to the table to be sacrificed alive.

Haunted with the fate of the legendary virgins and accompanied by 360-degree views of turquoise bays, I hiked four hours from the rocky north of the island to the more fertile south where most of the Ayamara population lives.

The town was buzzing with foreigners and several restaurants and small hotels were under construction.

I descended the 1,000 ancient Inca steps that lead to the harbour, dodging donkeys, locals and travellers, and took my last trip across Lake Titicaca.

My childish fantasies seemed unimaginative after having experienced it. I had run to one of the world's far-flung regions, immersed myself in its intoxicating atmosphere and emerged excited by adventures that lay ahead.

IF YOU GO

- La C'pula Hotel: La C'pula Hotel perches at the edge of Copacabana on a hillside overlooking Lake Titicaca. An impeccably clean room with a comfortable double bed and private bathroom was $14 US a night. The honeymoon suite was $32 US a night. Solar-heated water is on tap all day and original artwork hangs in all 18 rooms.

- The restaurant offers vegetarian, local and international cuisine. I ordered filet mignon, the most expensive item on the menu, and a half bottle of excellent Chilean wine. I paid $9 US.

- The expatriate German owner and his local staff offer premier service, including tourist information in three languages.

- For more information, see hotelcupula.com.