



Floating on **Lake Titicaca**

Peru



Photos and text by Nellie Huang

The ancient Uros named the lake 'Titicaca', meaning 'Stone Puma', presumably for its resemblance to the shape of a puma. In those days, the lake was a holy sanctuary, and you don't need to go far to see why. Travelling on the lake is like being on the open sea – until the peaks of the Cordillera Real emerge in the distance. Standing at 3,812m above sea level, Lake Titicaca is the world's highest navigable lake – an impressive claim to fame.

Stunning as it may be, the lake's best features are its indigenous natives whose culture and way of life are one of a kind. The Uros tribes pre-date the Inca civilisation, having miraculously survived centuries of colonisation and human interference to this day. These days, the Uros continue to lead their unusual lifestyle, similar to their ancestors' thousands of years ago.

The Uros floating islands

Out in the middle of the lake, I breathed in deeply; the air was thin at this altitude. My feet wobbled a little as I stepped onto the floating island. Built with layers of totora reeds, the entire village was literally floating on the water surface. Like walking on a water bed, my feet sank slightly with each step.

Home to eight Uros families, the village was approximately 30m long, shaped like a triangle. I steadied myself on the totora floor and faced the islanders, managing a nervous smile. I struggled to pronounce my first Aymara word, 'yuspagara!' (thank you!). The villagers returned my pathetic attempt with a grin on their faces.

'Let us thank the Sun God for your arrival!' The village chief chanted wholeheartedly in Aymara. I tried to focus, but everything around me was all too exciting – the sounds

of children giggling and the shuffling of the totora all at once diverted my attention.

The Uros men wore woollen hats called *chollos* that expressed their marital status, while the women wore layers of clothes for the cold weather. Sitting in a circle weaving handicraft, the women chatted and giggled. With the full skirts and traditional derby hats the women wear, the myriad of colours was intoxicating.

We packed onto the islanders' dragon-shaped canoe, which now sailed out to the next floating village. The Uros build firm and resilient reed canoes or *balsa de totora* for daily transportation on the lake. Weaved with thick layers of totora, these canoes are shaped like animals, a practice started in an attempt to ward off the Incas during ancient times. They have been preserved to this day more for practical purposes than a system of defence.

Life in a floating village

Over 60 floating Uros islands are scattered throughout the lake, stretching from southeastern Peru to western Bolivia. Only 10 of them allow visitors, while others prefer to remain in seclusion away from the shore. These islands are a two-hour boat ride from Puno on the Peruvian side of the lake.

Life for the Uros has never been easy. There is no electricity on these islands, nor any medical support or healthcare. The lake provides them

with their basic necessities – from food to shelter and a living.

As our local guide explained, 'The Uros do not need any money for necessities. They get everything from the lake and education is free. The only money they need is for their children's school supplies.' Their source of income these days comes from selling handicraft to tourists.

Tourism and modernisation, however, are now threatening the Uros culture. Many islanders have already moved to the mainland, with only a few hundred remaining on the lake. The introduction of tourists has not only disrupted their self-sufficient system, but also threatened the survival of old traditions.

How to get there

Most tour operators in Puno organise affordable daytrips to the floating islands. Public boats do not bring you to the floating islands. Alternatively, daytrips can be made from the Bolivian side by catching a hydrofoil at Copacabana.

When to visit

The best time to visit the lake is just after the dry season from September to November, when the weather is sunny and not too dry. Avoid the rainy season from November to February.

ON THE WEB:

<http://www.laketiticaca.org/>
<http://www.punoinfo.com/>
<http://www.peru-explorer.com/>
<http://www.spiritus-temporis.com/inca-mythology/inca-foundation-legends.html>



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