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A tangy mix of the Med and America

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Budget-conscious backpackers and earnest retirees on organized tours normally speed through Lima en route to Machu Picchu, the mystical Incan city 1,300km south-east of the chaotic Peruvian capital.

As they congregate noisily in the lobbies of mid-range hotels, already kitted out for their Andean adventures, or trawl the gringo haunts of the touristy Miraflores district on a night-before binge, I am tempted to stop them all, and warn them of their folly.

Because in their haste to follow a path trodden by millions, they may be overlooking another, less-traveled route: around the restaurants of Lima. "It is on gastronomic turf where one can best understand about natives and invaders, because surely this is the most permeable zone of all culture, the one closest to pleasure, to necessity and to hunger," writes Rodolfo Hinostroza, Peruvian poet, narrator, playwright and culinary commentator in the *Incan Guide to Peru*.

Although driven by their lust for shiny metals, the Spanish discovered a lot more than gold when they invaded the Incan empire. The tomato was a novelty, as were potatoes, chilly peppers, corn, avocados, yucca, and peanuts, all abundant in a region spanning every conceivable climatic - and agricultural - zone.

The home-sick Spaniards added garlic, olive oil, and lemon to give birth to the tantalizing mélange of Mediterranean and Latin American. Include South America's best seafood, influence with Asian, African, Italian and Arabian cooking, flavor with a thousand and one herbs and spices and you begin to taste modern Peru.

I am barely out of Lima's airport when the sharp tang of *cebiche* finds my nostrils from El Segundo Muelle, a funky two-storey restaurant on the San Isidro cliff-tops. To the uninitiated, *cebiche* is a preparation of raw fish - mainly sea bass - marinated in lime juice and spiced with chillies, onion, and pepper. Although examples found all along Latin America's Pacific coast are good, nobody does it like the Peruvians. El Segundo Muelle excels for its variations on the basic theme.

My *tres ajíes* (three chillies) is a colorful, spicy interpretation that I wash down with a glass of chilled Chilean sauvignon blanc. In Peru, *cebiche* often arrives with a few slices of boiled potato or yucca, of which there are 300 varieties in the country. The unpretentious tuber is ideal for absorbing the tangy, fishy residue.

A few days later I am joined in Lima by my sybaritic wife, so we celebrate over dinner in La Rosa Nautica, the best-situated restaurant in Peru. Built on a rock jetty about 150m from the shoreline, the sprawling wooden pier eatery features stained glass windows, high ceilings and - at lunchtime - a break-line view of wet-suited surfers catching Pacific rollers. The food, they say, is not what it was, so you're paying for the location and cachet. However, we had no complaints about our shared starter of octopus carpaccio, drizzled with extra virgin olive oil and served, by request, with a rich olive sauce on the side.

Her main was a fish and prawn *chupe*, a soup thickened with rice and cream. I went for home-made ravioli stuffed with prawns and bathed in a light cream sauce. The bill, including aperitifs, wine, deserts, cover and service charges, is 265 soles (US\$75), fairly expensive by Peruvian standards.

For lunch the following day we venture to Barranco, another coastal suburb, which is a celebrated melting pot of intellectuals, foreign expatriates, immigrant families and workers. With bars, restaurants and artisan stores at every turn, Barranco is Lima's best-known Bohemian quarter and a great place for a cheap meal. Vicente Furguele, the Argentine owner of Canta Rana, cuts a casual figure in shorts, flip-flops and football shirt as he laughs with regulars.

The menu appears to be aimed at survivors of the night before, starting with reputedly the best Bloody Mary in town and encompassing all kinds of restorative seafood soup. After wan tan and *cebiche* starters, they bring us giant bowls of *parihuela* and *sudada de marisco*, both sublime broths brimming with shellfish, prawns and fish chunks.

The king of the hangover cures, however, is *Levántate Lazaro!* (Get up Lazarus!), which includes sea urchins for an added dose of iodine. But eating out in Lima need not involve seafood. After *cebiche*, one of the country's best culinary exports is *aji de gallina*, chicken pieces stewed in a sauce of milk, cheese, chillies and walnuts.

Chinese-Peruvian restaurants, known as *chifas*, are cheap, popular and uniformly good. The steakhouses, or *parrilladas*, rival Buenos Aires's finest.

A mouth-watering showcase of the best in *Criollo* fare is found at Las Brujas de Caciche, a relaxed family restaurant in a quiet Miraflores street.

Perhaps fittingly, the most exquisite dining experience in Lima is Huaca Pucllana, a modern, minimalist restaurant named after the imposing restored pre-Incan pyramid that soars toward the stars in Miraflores. The temple watches over me as I peruse a menu that mingles traditional Peruvian with Pacific Rim and Italian tastes. I feel an urge to translate the surrealism of the moment to the tour groups back at the hotel.

Mark Mulligan was the FT's Andean correspondent until last summer.