

Travel

Spirited away by Peru's Pisco trail

Paul Richardson discovers a desert oasis touring the vineyards of the country's national drink



The desert oasis of Huacachina

Paul Richardson MAY 1, 2015

At the back of the drinks cabinet, next to the Tia Maria, always stood a black frosted bottle in the shape of an Inca deity. As a child, I couldn't imagine how this exotic personage had arrived in our home in southern England. All I knew was it sat there unopened year in, year out. On the label were the words "Pisco del Peru".

I think of that mysterious bottle as I take my place at the English Bar in the Country Club, a 1920s grand hotel in the well-to-do San Isidro district of Lima. There could hardly be a better place to receive a late initiation into the mysteries of pisco. If the hushed and wood-panelled bar, once frequented by Johnny Weissmuller and Ava Gardner, is a temple to Peru's national drink, veteran barman Roberto Meléndez is its high priest. It was Meléndez's father, also a barman, who bequeathed to his son the traditional recipe for a pisco sour combining *pisco puro* (pure because it was distilled from a single grape variety) with sugar syrup and the juice of the lime-like Peruvian lemon, plus a whisked egg white and a few drops of Angostura bitters.

"I am a more of a purist than most Peruvian barmen," says Meléndez as he gets busy with the shaker, mixing the drink in his own generous proportions of 4:1:1, pisco: lemon: syrup. The pisco he is using is of the strong and pungent Quebranta type, made from one of the eight grape varieties officially authorised for pisco production.

Served in a short-stemmed wine glass, the pisco sour is a thing of simple beauty, its creamy head

giving way to a delicious icy shock of lemon and alcohol.

On a rack behind the bar, Meléndez shows me some of the pisco brands to be conjured with, singling out Portón, 1615, and Tres Generaciones. The vineyards and distilleries of Peru's pisco production zone are, he explains, concentrated in the valley of Ica, four hours south of Lima in the state of the same name. While Cusco and Machu Picchu are rammed with tourists, he adds, this fascinating region — whose high points include the Pacific seaside town of Paracas and the famous Nazca Lines, as well as Peru's signature tippie — remains drastically under-visited.

Two days later I am sitting on a Cruz del Sur bus heading out of Lima on the Pan-American Highway, watching the city's sprawling shanties and mounds of rubble give way to desert sands beyond which can be glimpsed the glinting Pacific. The Peruvian coastal strip is one of the driest landscapes on earth, with an average rainfall of 5mm a year. Wizen palms punctuate a barren landscape of rolling dunes. To the left, through a haze, stand the first foothills of the mighty Andes. Then come the vines. Peru seems like the last place you might think of finding the species *Vitis vinifera*. But here they are, row upon row of them on both sides of the highway, their boughs weighed down with ripe fruit.



In Ica, the regional capital, *flamboyán* trees are in blazing orange bloom and every single-storey house has its shady vine in the front porch along with mangoes, avocados, pecan trees and plums. Along the dirt tracks criss-crossing the valley floor, signs advertise the new Ruta del Pisco, a Peruvian government-sponsored scheme launched in 2013 that highlights distilleries along the valley that open their doors to visitors.

Remembering Meléndez's advice, I begin my pisco tour at 1615, an artisan distillery where architect Nicolás Kisic has built a stunning contemporary bodega inspired by the region's desert architecture. Around the distillery, fat bunches of yellow Quebranta grapes hang in the shade below vines trained high on poles. Spanish conquistador Francisco de Caravantes brought the first grapevines to Peru from the Canary Islands in 1551, making these some of the earliest attempts at viticulture in the New World. But when King Philip II prohibited the planting of vineyards in the American colonies, the Peruvians turned their hand to distilling, fermenting the grape must in clay amphoras known by the Quechua Indians as *pisko*. In the process they created what locals claim, plausibly enough, to be the Americas' oldest hooch (other competitors for the title being tequila and rum).

Together with 1615's master distiller Rodrigo Bussalleu, I taste my way through 1615's range of aromatic distillates made from the eight grape varieties authorised for pisco production. They are strong, characterful and unexpectedly refined.

I head to La Caravedo, headquarters of Pisco Portón and the Ica valley's most renowned estate. La Caravedo was bought by Texan oil millionaire William Kallop, who, together with Johnny Schuler,

a larger-than-life figure who has become known as an ambassador for pisco, plans to give Peru's national drink the respect that has hitherto eluded it.



The pool at Hotel Libertador, formerly known as Hotel Paracas

La Caravedo breathes an aristocratic *dolce vita*, like the Latin American version of some great European wine estate. On the floor of the open-air wine press, made from a monumental trunk of desert tree, Schuler serves me an iced pisco sour to take the edge off the midday sun. The grape harvest has just swung into gear and gangs of pickers are moving among the rows of vines while the sultry quiet of the afternoon is broken by the sound of a banging drum, played to scare away the

birds.

The tasting over, I head north to Paracas, a fishing village on a sweeping bay, and hub of the incipient tourism in Ica state. Paracas lies close to the epicentre of a 2007 earthquake that destroyed much of the town.

Today it has the eager, ingenuous charm of, say, a Costa Brava village in the 1960s. Peruvian families sit on the boardwalk scoffing their picnics and coloured parasols flutter on the beach. From the line of seafood restaurants along the prom, where the line of fishing boats tied up on the waterside seems like some kind of guarantee, my choice of the Restaurante Bahia is a hunch that comes up trumps — the ceviche of corvina is a dish of palate-wringing freshness, and the dozen enormous scallops are grilled with cheese, in the local style.

It's Paracas' small-town simplicity, and its low prices, that win me over. But it turns out that the village is riding a cresting economic wave. For decades since its construction in 1942, the Hotel Paracas, on the seafront a few minutes' walk from the diminutive harbour, was the only proper hotel in town. After the earthquake, aid poured into the region, investments swiftly followed and four new resorts, including the Hilton Doubletree, the San Agustín, and the Peruvian-owned Aranwa, have opened their doors on the outskirts of town.



Pruning grapes at La Caravedo

At the Hotel Paracas, which has been newly refurbished and is now known as the Hotel Libertador, I sit under a hot blue sky, slurping on a pisco punch (a classic preparation based on fresh pineapple) and take in the view of the curving coastline. Big white ships shunt slowly across the horizon. Round the bay to the south, 20 minutes inside the Paracas National Reserve, lies La Mina, spoken of in hushed tones as one of Peru's most dazzling unspoilt beaches.

If I squint through the sun, I can just see the craggy silhouettes of the Ballestas archipelago, a cluster of islands an hour out of Paracas Bay by boat. The Ballestas Islands (known by some as the "poor man's Galápagos") are home to huge colonies of sea lions, Humboldt penguins and Pacific seabirds. Another fascinating sight is the Laguna de Huacachina, about 40km inland outside Ica. The lagoon is a bona fide desert oasis surrounded by a turbulent sea of towering dunes, and a

delectable, snoozy refuge from the heat and dust.

Overall, I'm sold. Not just on pisco as a noble drink or the surprising attractions of Paracas. But on Peru itself, a country whose curious byways, like its desert valleys, so arid, yet in other ways so rich, have received too little attention.

Details

Paul Richardson was a guest of Miraviva (miravivatravel.com), which offers luxury tailor-made trips to Peru. One week in Lima and Paracas, including accommodation in the Country Club Hotel (Lima) and Hotel Paracas, private transfers, city tour, a visit to the Ballestas Islands, a flight over Peru's Nazca Lines and a day trip to the vineyards and Pisco distilleries in the Ica Valley costs from £1,590 per person based on two sharing. Flights from London would add about £650.

Photographs: Robertharding.com

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