

Unlocking secrets of the Andean world

By Claudia Capos
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

ARICA, Chile — It's getting hotter by the minute. Every footstep on this russet moonscape reminds us that Chile's Atacama Desert has earned a reputation as the driest, most desolate place in the world. Nothing grows or moves on its barren hard-packed crust. Well, almost nothing.

In the outlying desert, we drive past giant henschel images, made by unknown hands, depicting a herder and his llamas and two monkeys clinging to the slopes. Now, as we walk on the Pampa de Chaca plain, strange apparitions loom in the stark landscape. They resemble the gigantes and cabezudos that parade through the streets during carnival celebrations.

As it turns out, the Atacama Desert serves as a curious open-air museum for the creative works of artists who lived centuries apart. Chilean sculptor Juan Diaz Fleming fashioned his towering Tutelar Figures in the 1990s to depict sacred human and animal symbols of the Aymara people. More than 1,000 years earlier, Andean Indians etched the surface of hillsides and used dark rocks to create enigmatic geoglyphs.

Just as Doug and I begin to feel french-fried by the blistering sun, a troupe of dancers in beaded blue-and-red satin outfits arrives, and somebody passes out plastic cups filled with pisco sour. After a few hearty refills, we watch the animated dance performance against the majestic backdrop of the Atacama Desert.

The treasures of the Andean world, both ancient and modern, were ours to explore during a 17-day cruise that started in the bustling seaport of Valparaiso, Chile, and took us north along South America's western edge, then through the Panama Canal and Caribbean Sea, and finally, to Miami.

We discovered that the Pacific seacoast fringing the dramatic Andes Mountains, stretching from Chile to Colombia, harbors some of the world's best-kept secrets — pre-Inca palaces and pyramids that lay buried for centuries, the world's oldest mummies dating back 8,000 years, and cloistered valleys where centuries-old ways of life still flourish.

This seaborne odyssey aboard Oceania Cruises' Marina opened our eyes to people, places, and events we knew little or nothing about.

"This itinerary appeals to seasoned cruisers who want to stop at out-of-the-way ports, visit unique destinations and cross far-distant countries off their bucket list," cruise director Peter Roberts tells us.

Spanish conquistadors and English buccaneers, including Sir Francis Drake, left their mark on Coquimbo, Chile, our first port-of-call. Locally run booze-cruise boats still fly the Jolly Roger. Traveling by bus along the "Ruta de las Estrellas" (Route of the Stars) toward the Elqui Valley, we stop at two Spanish colonial villages, La Serena and Vicuña, to scour the local markets for alpaca



CLAUDIA CAPOS FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Chilean sculptor Juan Diaz Fleming's towering Tutelar Figures in the Atacama Desert depict sacred human and animal symbols of the Aymara people. Chilean dancers entertain desert visitors with traditional dances.

sweaters, leather bags, and exotic fruits.

Passing long stretches of leafy vineyards, we arrive at the Capel pisco distillery. The Spanish first brought Muscat grapes to Chile, and pisco making began in 1733, our guide says, as she leads us on a distillery tour. Fermentation tanks, oak barrels and the sweet pungent aroma of wine fill the rambling building. Double distilling produces a smoother pisco preferred by Chileans, who turn up their noses at harsher-tasting Peruvian-made pisco. After sampling several fruity versions in Capel's tasting room, we have to agree with the Chileans.

Slate-gray Navy ships and freighters belching black smoke greet us in Callao, Peru, the gateway to the capital city of Lima and, via plane, to Machu Picchu, the ancient Inca citadel set high in the Andes Mountains. Arriving at Lima's Plaza Mayor, we find ourselves surrounded by wedding-cake palaces and imposing civic buildings. Inside the massive Lima Cathedral, we jockey for a glimpse of the crypt holding the bones of Spanish conquistador Francisco Pizarro, who founded the "City of Kings" in 1535.



In Lima's lively shopping district, store owners entice us with gold and lapis-lazuli jewelry. A short walk takes us to Casa Aliaga, the oldest colonial mansion in Lima and, some say, the Western Hemisphere. The stately home has been passed down through generations of the Aliaga family since the days of the conquistadors. Stepping through the doorway transports us back in time nearly five centuries, and we admire Spanish tilework, antique furnishings and a charming inner courtyard, as we sip Inca Kola.

Descendants of the Chimu people, who predated the Incas, still use mud bricks to construct their houses in the Peruvian seaport of Salaverry and neighboring Trujillo, much as their ancestors did centuries ago. Standing at the entrance to Chan Chan, the former capital of the Chimu kingdom, we marvel at the scale of this 8-mile-square

"city of palaces," the largest earthen metropolis built in the New World. Only one of Chan Chan's nine palaces, dating back as far as 900 AD, has been excavated. Threading our way through the labyrinth of thick mud walls, we discover ceremonial courtyards, platforms for ritualistic offerings and the royal family's living quarters inscribed with sun and moon motifs.

At our next port-of-call, Manta, Ecuador, we are surprised to find the central plaza brimming with Panama hats for sale. The vendors of this iconic headwear — which originated in Ecuador, not Panama — are handily outnumbered by Goth-looking iguanas foraging for sandwich scraps.

Our taxi driver, Darwin, offers to take us up to Montecristi, where artisans have been hand-weaving "superfinos" for several centuries. In the center of town, at the Manufactura de Sombreros Finos, a small Indian woman leans over a wooden hat form and deftly weaves thin toquilla straw fibers to create the crown and brim of a Panama hat, a process that can take months. After we select our favorite styles and wander through the town, Darwin drives us up to a broad plaza where we visit the impressive memorial to Ecuador's former president, Eloy Alfaro Delgado, and savor the lofty view.

The following day, the Marina sails across the equator, and crew members dressed as King Neptune and his royal court perform the Order of the Shellback ceremony, a rite of passage commemorating a sailor's first equatorial crossing. We are officially transformed from Slimy Polliwogs into Trusty Shellbacks.

Before the Marina enters the Panama Canal, it docks at Fuerte Amador, where we share a cab with Janice and Martin, a couple from Winnipeg, Canada, to see the sights around Panama City. Spanish conquistador Pedro Arias Dávila founded the city in 1519, and it became an important stopover along the trading route. After the buccaneer Henry Morgan sacked and burned the original city in 1671, it was rebuilt on a peninsula five miles away.

Over the years, Panama City's old quarter, Casco Antiguo, fell into neglect, and many of its ornate Spanish and French colonial buildings crumbled. Today it is being restored and has become a trendy hotspot for culture, dining, and entertainment. We wile away the afternoon, poking around the artisans' market, nibbling chocolates at Oro Moreno Chocolatier, wandering through the lattice of brick-paved streets and admiring the famous gold altar in the Church of San Jose.

Although Casco Antiguo has not yet regained its past glory, we return to the Marina knowing we have found another treasure in a far-distant country that we can now cross off our bucket list.

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By Patricia Harris
and David Lyon
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With the launch of Marina in 2011, Oceania Cruises pioneered a gastronomic focus for ocean cruising. To complement the five specialty gourmet restaurants aboard the 1,250-passenger vessel, Marina was the first in the cruise industry to feature a hands-on teaching kitchen. Now Marina and sister ship Riviera present a broad range of cooking classes as well as gastronomically oriented shore excursions. Cruise passengers were so enthusiastic about Oceania's culinary cruises that 750-passenger Regent Seven Seas Explorer launched in 2016 with a similar, if slightly more luxe, program. (Oceania and Regent are the small-ship lines of Norwegian Cruise Line Holdings.) Kathryn Kelly, the executive chef and director of culinary enrichment, puts it all together for both lines. We spoke with her recently about the pleasures of food and travel — and what she aims to accomplish with the cooking classes and food-oriented forays ashore.

Q. It must have seemed like a gamble to build a teaching kitchen on a cruise ship.

A. I had been in the world of public health and business before I went back midcareer to get a degree at the Culinary Institute of America. I had just started teaching in their continuing education program so I knew how passionate people were about watching the Food Network and about coming to the CIA boot camps. When I joined Oceania in 2011, we didn't know how much people would want to put on an apron and spend two hours in the kitchen when they were on vacation. It was a calculated risk, but it worked.

Q. We've heard that the classes are so popular that they always have a waiting list. What is their appeal?

A. Cooking is a very creative outlet. But I think the biggest thing is the sense of accomplishment. Guests have learned something and they're bringing it home. A lot of them go home and have a party. I might have shown them how to make sangria and paella and some tapas in Spain. Or how to make three different kinds of crepes in Sweden. We give them all the recipes and they have a party when they get home and talk about their trip. When I was younger, we used to go to peo-

ple's houses and they would pull out their projector and show us their slide show. Now they can cook for their friends. It's a wonderful thing when you are able to cook for your friends and family with a sense of joy and adventure.

Q. What are some of your favorite classes?

A. In the technique series, my favorite is the fish class. We teach eight different techniques for cooking fish in two hours. I also like the classes where we try to create authentic dishes of our

ports of call — Morocco, Greece, Turkey, the Baltics. The classes are a chance to teach the culinary history and the ingredients and techniques that are all part of the place. We are launching a new class by popular demand called "Slice of Life." People want to know how to buy a knife, how to hold a knife, how to sharpen a knife, how to make various cuts.

Q. How do you approach planning the Culinary Discovery and Gourmet Explorer shore excursions, for Oceania and Regent, respectively?

Kathryn Kelly concludes a cooking class about lemons aboard the Oceania Marina.
Byline

A. We offer between 40 and 50 tours in the Caribbean, the Baltics, the Mediterranean, Asia Pacific, and South America. Some of our guests are very well-traveled and some are visiting a destination for the first time. I try to create something that helps them see the place through a little bit different lens. I start by thinking about what I would want to do if I had one day in a

Cooking up a storm on the Seven Seas



specific port. We take people to local places where fishermen are just pulling the fish out of the water and we take them to three-star Michelin restaurants. In Uruguay, we teach guests how to dig out the hole and put the wood in exactly right to make a barbecue. In Tuscany, we have a meal prepared by a local chef in one of the former Medici hunting lodges. We taste the wine and olive oil from the property. People on their first visit to Tuscany get a sense of the countryside. Even for people who have been to Florence a hundred times, this is a once in a lifetime experience.

Q. What is one of your favorite Culinary Discovery Tours?

A. I like creating an experience where people get to know me and my chefs and where they get to meet their local hosts and hear their stories. They are not on a bus tour having a guide point out buildings. One of the tours that is most special to me is in Rhodes, Greece, right on the Turkey border.

I had eaten at a family restaurant for years and I asked them to open up their restaurant so that our guests could learn what it is like to have a family-owned restaurant in Greece. The papa was a baker. He's in his 90s. His son is a fisherman. They bring in fresh fish every day. They teach people how to tell if an octopus is fresh. We make food with them and then we sit down and eat and drink wine.

Q. What do travelers gain by approaching a destination from a gastronomic point of view?

A. There is a growing segment of people who travel to experience the world through food and wine. It's part of the search for authenticity. It's really fun for people to get to know a place by something other than churches and art and statues. I love churches and art and statues. But to taste the food and learn the history of the food is a unique and different way to get to know where you are. I love to eat. But I'm always curious about the foods of a particular region from the perspective of the history, the culture, family life, and farm life. The connections between the cuisine, the ingredients, and the traditions of a place are very compelling. It's just a fascinating way to study the world.

Interview was edited and condensed. Patricia Harris and David Lyon can be reached at harrislyon@gmail.com.