

# Lake Titicaca



Lake Titicaca is deservedly awash with gushing clichés. This incongruous splash of sapphire amid the stark plains of the Altiplano is one of the most beautiful sights in the region. Covering 8400 sq km and sitting at 3808m, it's the world's largest high-altitude lake.

The lake straddles both Peru and Bolivia, and is a remnant of the ancient inland sea known as Lago Ballivián, which covered much of the Altiplano before geological faults and evaporation brought about a drop in the water level.

The traditional Aymará villages along the lakeshore, with the snow-topped peaks of the Cordillera Real in the background, provide a magical landscape. Even more fascinating for the visitor are the colorful and historical communities that inhabit the lake's many tiny islands. Integral to any visit is learning about the region's ancient legends, which can enhance the travel experience.

Long rumored to be unfathomable, the depth of the lake has now been measured at up to 457m. Trout were introduced into it in 1939, but are now largely farmed in special hatcheries.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Visit the tiny island of **Pariti** (p115), whose lovely museum features exquisite finds from a recent excavation
- Discover vestiges of the Inca culture in and around **Copacabana** (p103)
- Check out a baptism (or even a vehicle blessing!) at **Copacabana cathedral** (p102)
- Visit **lakeside villages** (p107) between Copacabana and Sampaya, and take a spin in a reed boat
- Explore **Isla del Sol** (p109) and **Isla de la Luna** (p114) and enjoy spectacular lake views, ancient ruins and landscapes straight out of the Mediterranean



■ TELEPHONE CODE: 2

■ ELEVATION: 4810M

■ AREA: 8500 SQ KM

## History

When you first glimpse Lake Titicaca's crystalline, gemlike waters, beneath the looming backdrop of the Cordillera Real in the clear Altiplano light, you'll understand why pre-Inca people connected it with mystical events. Those early inhabitants of the Altiplano believed that both the sun itself and their bearded, white god-king, Viracocha, had risen out of its mysterious depths. The Incas, in turn, believed that it was the birthplace of their civilization.

When the Spanish arrived in the mid-16th century, legends of treasure began to surface, including the tale that some Incas had flung their gold into the lake to prevent the Spanish carting it off. Distinct fluctuations in the water level of the lake have led treasure hunters to speculate that the ruins of ancient cities might lie beneath its surface.

From year to year, changes in the water level of Lake Titicaca are not uncommon; previous fluctuations may even have inundated settlements and ruins. In the floods of 1985–86, highways, docks, fields and streets all disappeared beneath the rising

waters, adobe homes turned to mud and collapsed, and 200,000 people were displaced. It took several years for the Río Desaguadero, the lake's only outlet, to drain the flood waters.

Although evidence of submerged cities remains inconclusive, archaeologists are still unearthing exquisite finds around the lake. At Isla Koa, north of Isla del Sol, they found 22 large stone boxes containing a variety of artifacts: a silver llama, some shell figurines and several types of incense burners. And in 2004, the tiny island of Pariti hit world headlines when a team of Finnish and Bolivian archaeologists discovered elaborate and beautiful pottery there, which is now housed in a small museum on the island, and in La Paz.

## Climate

From February to November the climate around Lake Titicaca is mostly pleasant and sunny, but there's often a cool wind off the lake and nights can be bitterly cold. Most rainfall occurs in midsummer (December and January).

