

The new wave

Surfing | It is known for Inca ruins, Andean peaks and Amazonian jungles, but Peru also has a growing surf scene. *By Laura Holt*

Jet lag has got the better of me and I'm awake early. I pull back the soft, muslin drapes of my suite and slide open the door to hear the wash of waves against the shore. I walk out along the sand, dimpled only by the footprints of seabirds. Then, suddenly, the silence is broken as a huge ribbon of pelicans flutters by, the movement of the birds' large wings clearly audible. I look for someone to share the moment with but there's not a soul in sight.

This is not a scene you would normally associate with Peru. For years, the prosperous South American nation has attracted travellers to its Andes mountains, Inca ruins and Amazon basin. But few who journey to see the 15th-century citadel of Machu Picchu ever reach the country's considerable coastline, which stretches more than 1,500 miles.

Slowly, however, all this is changing, thanks in large part to the growth of one particular resort, Mancora. Situated in the far north of Peru, close to the border with Ecuador, the town has gradually gone from sleepy fishing village to relaxed surf retreat over the past half century, due to its reliable offshore swell and tropical year-round climate. And although it's still very much the place where bronzed bodies go to ride the tide and sink a beer at sunset, Mancora's latest incarnation sees it standing on the brink of becoming a fully-fledged luxury destination, after a wave of upmarket openings between the golden sands of Pocitas Beach and the bustling main pueblo.

After my pelican encounter, I sit down for breakfast at Kichic, a hotel that opened a year ago on a near-deserted

Mancora has gone from sleepy fishing village to laid-back surf retreat without losing its character

stretch of Pocitas Beach. The owner, Cristina Gallo, is originally from Lima but has had a hand in several Mancora hotels over the past 20 years. I feast on fruit drizzled in honey, scrambled eggs and freshly-made *jugo verde* (green juice), on a raised wooden deck overlooking the sea.

Behind me, a lantern-strung path leads to the hotel's vegetarian restaurant and seafood bar, set amid tropical gardens that brim with eucalyptus, bougainvillea and bamboo bushes. There's also a yoga studio and nine suites, with large double beds draped in white fabric and flatscreen televisions that are concealed behind canvas bags reading: "The best connection is with yourself, nature and the person next to you."

Indeed, there seems little time to waste on watching TV in Mancora. Gazing out across the Pacific as surfers ride the waves, Kichic's receptionist Eduardo Mellet tells me that, from July to October, you often see humpback whales cresting the waters beyond the hotel's door. The season being against me, I opt instead for a tour that explores another side of the area's rich marine life.

Ursula Behr moved to Mancora nine years ago after working as a dolphin trainer in Lima and a kayaking guide in Manú National Park. Now in her forties, she had originally visited Mancora as a surfer when she was 16, camping out on the beach every New Year's Eve. "There were no hotels, no electricity and everything was served warm — warm drink-



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Laura Holt was a guest of Journey Latin America (journeylatinamerica.co.uk), which offers a week in Mancora staying at DCO Suites, with return transfers from Talara airport from £1,010 per person. There are daily flights to Talara from Lima on LAN (lan.com), from £213 return. Kichic (kichic.com) has doubles from £126; Ecologie (ecologiemancora.com) offers doubles from £44; DCO Suites (hoteldco.com) has doubles from £141. For more information, visit vivamancora.com and visitperu.com



ing water, warm tomatoes in your salad — the only thing that was fresh was the fish," she recalls.

Returning with her husband years later, she realised that while the town had come a long way, there were still few tour operators, so she set up Iguanas Trips and started offering kayaking excursions along the coast. Eventually, by chance, she discovered giant sea turtles on one of her outings and, drawing on her experience as a dolphin trainer, she began swimming with them.

As I stand on a tiny fishing boat in the shallow waters off El Nuro pier, they start to emerge. First one, then several more. Finally, 15 are swimming around the boat. There are estimated to be 500 of these graceful giants in the waters around Mancora but only a handful are inquisitive enough to come this close.

Behr's background means she knows how the animals should be treated. "Don't ever touch them," she urges. "Just let them rub up against you." Insulated in Neoprene, I flop into the water and swim, for an hour or more, eyeball-to-eyeball with the giant green turtles, as they use me as a scratching post.

It would be easy to spend hours lazing on the beach at Mancora but one day I decide to take heed of a message on a chalkboard which, next to a stick figure of a surfer, says: "If you don't try it here, you'll never try it." And who better to teach me than Pilar Yrigoyen, a former Peruvian national champion who now runs classes out of the Del Wawa hotel and restaurant on the beach. Despite

More emerging surf spots

Lakshadweep Islands, India When professional surfer Dave Rastavich was filmed riding two huge waves in the Lakshadweep archipelago for the 2010 film *Castles in the Sky*, he put Indian surfing on the map. The islands, 10 of which are inhabited, lie about 300km off India's southwest coast; there are flights and ferries from Kochi in Kerala. Companies including India Surf Tours (indiasurftour.com) run organised trips. lakshadweeptourism.com

Hainan Island, China A tentative surf culture is taking root in Hainan, a tropical island that is the smallest and southernmost province of China and is often referred to as the People's Republic's answer to Hawaii. "It's what I imagine surfing was like in the UK in the '70s and '80s" says champion British longboarder Ben Skinner, who has competed in two World Longboard Tour events there. en.hainan.gov.cn

Stromness, Orkney Islands, Scotland With just a handful of local surfers and more than 70 islands to explore, Orkney is one of the last European surf destinations to guarantee uncrowded waves and, as a result, is garnering growing attention from surf magazines and websites. "I love it, but you have to be prepared to wait out the storms," says specialist surf photographer Tim Nunn. discover-orkney.co.uk

Ólafsfjörður, Iceland Surf films such as *Strange Rumblyngs in Shangri La* (2014) have helped make cold-water surf destinations such as Iceland increasingly popular. The town of Ólafsfjörður in northern Iceland is a good place to experience this unique scene. Arctic Surfers (arcticsurfers.com) runs a range of trips, including one combining surfing and snowboarding. northiceland.is

Matt Barr

much undignified spluttering and nose-diving, I eventually manage to stand up, grateful that, while reliable enough to keep experts coming back, Mancora's waves aren't so large as to be intimidating to novices.

Another afternoon, I switch to two wheels with Alvaro Silva, a Chilean national who came to Mancora a year ago to set up Amancay Bikes, a company which rents bicycles and runs cycling tours. Peddling past Mancora's lively local food market at the north end of town, we head out to Eco Fundo La Caprichosa, a nature reserve, adventure playground, luxury hotel and organic restaurant that has been developed and reforested over the past five years on a patch of erstwhile barren land, by a Swiss-Peruvian millionaire.

You can spend a full day whizzing down zipwires here and racing around

From top: the Kichic hotel on Pocitas Beach; surfers at Mancora; architect Tom Gimbert's Ecologie, which is built entirely from local materials

the grounds on quad bike-like UTVs. Or, you can simply float in the pool, as I did, glass of homemade honey wine in hand, as iridescent red and yellow birds bolt through the sky.

Back in the bustling heart of town — where rickety, three-wheel mototaxis are the accepted mode of transport for whisking passengers along the Pan-American Highway between the *pueblo* and Pocitas Beach — I check into another new retreat. Of all the places I stay, nowhere signifies Mancora's upmarket aspirations more than DCO Suites, a sleek, Ibiza-like property, where house music wafts by the pool and Balinese-style beach beds line the shore.

Nearby is Ecologie, a hotel created by Tom Gimbert, a 34-year-old French architect who divides his time between his practice near Nantes and his new life in Mancora. Gimbert built this rustic back-to-nature lodge four years ago, after initially coming to Mancora to kitesurf. He ended up staying to craft



some local restaurants before branching out into hotels and he's now the go-to architect in town, responsible for creating the secret-garden-like set-up at Kichic among others. Ecologie, however, is his baby, built using all-local materials of wood, bamboo and stone to create a series of cabana-style rooms, raised on various levels around a courtyard and pool, where hummingbirds come to play.

"This was an experiment for me," Gimbert explains over a breakfast of fresh fruit and homemade pastries one morning. "I used plastic from old advertising boards to make the roofs, then covered them up with palm fronds."

While many of those I meet tell arrival stories — of coming to Mancora on holiday, falling in love with the place and returning to start a new life — one born-and-bred local is Juan Seminario, owner of La Sirena d'Juan, the town's finest restaurant. Also built by Gimbert, it serves contemporary takes on Peruvian classics, such as lime-cured seafood ceviches and sashimi-like tuna tiraditos, covered in soy and olive oil. Overlooking the Pan-American Highway, the restaurant is packed with a mix of well-dressed Peruvians and shaggy-haired surfers sharing beers.

Seminario tells me about how Mancora has changed: "I was scared to open this restaurant 10 years ago because, in the beginning, Mancora only had two high seasons — new year and July, during Peruvian independence day. The rest of the time, there was no one. Now . . ." he says, gesturing his hand around the crowded room. "This is why Mancora is moving up, because a lot of people from Lima, a lot of French, Chileans and Argentines, came here to surf, and then stayed to open restaurants and hotels."

However, Mancora isn't entirely the creation of outsiders. It's still very much underpinned by an authentic, local community that lovers of rough-around-the-edges Latin America will adore. It's there in backstreet cevicherias such as César's, a no-frills restaurant tucked away behind the market, which serves the best seafood in town. And it's there in the people singing Spanish-language songs outside their houses on lazy Sunday afternoons. For Mancora has managed a trick that few other destinations pull off — hanging on to its original character while evolving from fishing village into surf town and, finally, into a laid-back luxury resort.

Short cuts

Faroe Islands and Svalbard Two remote groups of islands are preparing for a tourism bonanza this week, thanks to a quirk of celestial mechanics. While a partial solar eclipse will be visible on Friday March 20 across a large swathe of Europe and north Africa, a total eclipse, with the moon blocking all direct sunlight and turning day into night, will be visible from land in only two places: the Faroe Islands and the Svalbard archipelago. "Approximately 8,000 tourists are set to visit the Faroe Islands for the eclipse, and we see this as a great possibility to highlight the Faroese culture," said Guðrið Højgaard, director of tourism at Visit Faroe Islands. "The

number actually greatly exceeds the number of hotel rooms — there are only about 500 rooms in total — but the local people have been very keen to help, and many have rented out their houses to accommodate the massive influx." Though the total eclipse will occur just after 9.40am in the Faroes, a series of events are planned, including concerts in full darkness and traditional dancing in the streets. The next total eclipse visible from Europe will not take place until 2026. visitfaroeislands.com; visitsvalbard.com

Toronto Lifeguard stations along the beaches of Lake Ontario have been

converted into public art installations in an attempt to lure visitors to the waterfront during the winter months. Winter Stations is the result of an international competition run by three Toronto architecture, art and design companies. More than 200 designs were submitted; the winning five were built and went on display last month. They include Driftwood Throne, by DM Studio, which turns a utilitarian metal lookout into a huge wooden sculptural form, and Sling Swing, by WMB Studio, inspired by the idea of beachgoers in deck chairs huddling together for warmth in winter. The five installations will be on display until March 20, and the



Toronto's Sling Swing art installation

competition is due to be repeated next year. winterstations.com

London British Airways has expanded its "carousel collection" service at City airport, allowing arriving passengers to leave without their luggage, which is collected and couriered to their home or hotel. The service had previously been trialled among executive club members on certain flights but will now be offered to all passengers on all domestic flights and BA says it hopes to include international flights later this year. Delivery is currently limited to addresses within the M25; it costs £25 to £45, depending on delivery distance. ba.com

British Columbia Robson Gmoser, a leading Canadian mountain guide and son of the man credited with inventing the sport of heli-skiing, was killed in an avalanche near Golden, British Columbia, last week. Gmoser, 45, was a highly experienced and widely respected guide who had been skiing since infancy. He leaves a wife and son. The death will cast a shadow over celebrations being organised next month by Canadian Mountain Holidays, the company founded by his father, Hans Gmoser, to mark the 50th anniversary of the first heli-ski holidays.

Tom Robbins