

AREQUIPA - THE WHITE CITY



The Jewel of the South

Ah, Arequipa! Various known as the "Jewel of the South" for its beauty, "The White City" for its stunning buildings in the local sillar stone, and "The City of the Volcanoes" for the snow-capped (dormant!) volcanoes that lie just behind the city, it is, quite simply, a place to fall in love with.

The name itself shows the city's fantastic location; when the Incas were marching through, the Inca Mayta Capac supposedly said (in Quechua!), "Ari quepay", or "We'll stop here", which over time became corrupted to 'Arequipa'. Ever since then, people have decided to make their home here, with each group contributing something new and beautiful to the city and surrounding area. Arequipa itself was recognised as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in the year 2000.

Location, Location, Location

We'll get on to what to see in Arequipa in a minute, but first of all, let's look at the city's location. It lies in what is known as the "Valley of the Volcanoes". The snow-capped peaks of El Misti, Chachani and Pichupichu form a dramatic backdrop to the city - where else can you sit in thirty-degree heat and see snow whenever you look up?

And that gets us on to the weather. Arequipa fits into Peru holidays all year round because the climate is blessedly warm and dry all year-round: it almost never rains, it barely even gets cloudy, and the air stays mountain-fresh. In winter (June-August) it can get a little cold at night but that's about the limit of your worries. What's even better is that, because of the snow-melt from the surrounding mountains, the countryside around Arequipa is lush and green and the Rio Chili sparkling and clear.



The White City

OK, so the location's good, but it's been ruined with ugly modern buildings, right? Well, no... the stunning baroque cathedral is the tallest building for miles around; the centre of Arequipa consists of narrow cobbled medieval streets and those streets are lined with colonial houses constructed from the local white sillar volcanic stone. The Plaza de Armas (main square) is lined with shady two-storey colonnades on three

sides, has the cathedral on the other, an elegant fountain in the middle and is filled with palm trees and flowers... it's just too gorgeous for words so have a look at our photo gallery to see what we're talking about!

Another name for Arequipa is the "Seville of South America" and you'll immediately know why as you wander around. The cathedral, the former Jesuit cloisters and church of La Compañía, and the dozens of other churches dotted around the historic centre, all give Arequipa a real 'Old Spain' kind of feel but around every corner, something will remind you that you're in the New World, whether it's the smell of roasting Andean peppers or seeing a llama tied to a lamp-post! And then, of course, you look up and see El Misti...



Santa Catalina and other sights

Arequipa is also home to the convent of Santa Catalina, and this is probably the major attraction for people visiting Arequipa on a holiday in Peru. It's really like a city within a city - it has its own streets, houses and churches and was a closed community until the 1970s when the nuns moved to a smaller complex and the site was opened to tourists. The convent was home to St. Ana de los Angeles Monteagudo and Pope John Paul II came to Arequipa in 1985 to perform the beatification ceremony. Today, the convent of Santa Catalina is perfectly preserved and you have the opportunity to step through the convent doors and go 400 years back in time as you wander the streets and visit the houses of a unique part of the world's heritage.

There are plenty of other things to do in Arequipa, of course, and one thing we always recommend is the walk up to the old district of Yanahuara. There you will find a lovely little plaza, with a fantastic church on one side and Moorish-style arches on another, through which you have a superb view of El Misti.

The city is also home to several museums, notably the Anthropological Museum of the University of Santa Maria. A bit of a mouthful, but worth getting your lips around as, among other things, the museum is the proud resting-place of Juanita the Mummy! Juanita was discovered in 1996 on the volcano of Ampato, very near to Arequipa, and is one of the most important archaeological finds in South America. Because she was in such good condition, scientists were able to learn a great deal from her about pre-Columbian diets, textiles and customs. Further studies have revealed that she died as part of an Incan sacrifice ritual, her body preserved by freezing temperatures. The museum also has many other interesting exhibits and is well worth a visit.

Around Arequipa

In the area around Arequipa there is also plenty to see and do. The surrounding countryside has some nice walking, and some lovely towns such as Yura and Jesús, which are situated near natural springs which produce water with famous healing properties. Although most people prefer to head off to the nearby [Colca Canyon](#) for their walking, it's also possible to trek to the summit of El Misti, with its stunning views over Arequipa, and there have been several recent climbing expeditions to reach the summit of Arequipa's watchful guardian!