

Vacation horrors: Part 2

Three days ago in Lima, Peru, terrorists threw dynamite bombs into a hotel where I had stayed and a very charming restaurant at which I had dined. The perpetrators were not irate readers of this column but Tupac Amaru guerrillas intent on overthrowing the government of much-troubled Peru.

Which brings me to the next installment of vacation horrors.

My first column on awful places to visit dealt with Jeddah, Saudi Arabia's ghastly commercial centre. The Saudis were highly upset by the story but a lot of readers who had suffered through life in Jeddah wrote in to share their misery with me.

Of course, I will not be vacationing this year in Saudi Arabia.

Back to Lima. Don't get me wrong. Peru is one of the world's most interesting and beautiful countries. Go and see the awesome Andes, visit the marvel of Machu Picchu, tour Lake Titicaca and ride the mountain railroads. Savor some of the world's best seafood, including shrimp, lobster and squid that make the heart race with gastronomic joy. But do not, repeat do not, visit Lima.

Peru's vast, sprawling capital has four million people. Half of them are unemployed. Indians from the cold, windswept Altiplano of the Andes flock down to Lima, hunting subsistence jobs that do not exist. Around Lima's once beautiful colonial centre have sprung up putrid, evil slums where displaced peasants live on the sharp edge of starvation.

It is tragedy on a huge scale: Two million desperate, hungry people who have lost their family and cultural roots in the mountains, living in the formless purgatory of Lima's shantytowns. Many Third World nations in Africa, Asia and Latin America suffer this same affliction; in Peru, with a per capita income less than half of Mexico's, the problem is terrifying.

Punch



"He's decided to replace the 'Star-Spangled Banner' with 'September Song.'"

ERIC
MARGOLIS



Desperately poor Peru has almost no social security or unemployment system. Unemployed must fend for themselves — and for their large families. In this very Catholic nation there is no birth control. Little wonder, then, that at dusk Lima becomes a city of shadows and fear.

One evening I went to interview the prime minister. My Peruvian companion advised me to remove my watch and glasses lest they be snatched off me — and this in the 20 feet between our car and the prime minister's office.

You just do not go out at night in Lima. Even the best neighborhoods, like Miraflores, are perilous. The President's Palace looks like the Alamo.

Who could be scared of Lima after riding New York's subways, I thought. So off I went downtown. Smoke and dust make the weak streetlights blurry and vague. Huddled forms stared at me menacingly. Here were truly desperate people, many starving. My jacket alone would feed a family for a few days. I am used to the slums of Cairo, Delhi or Detroit — but here was a new, high-intensity fear. People in Lima seemed ready to explode.

My hotel was surrounded by police and guards armed with sub-machineguns — necessary as this week's bombing showed. I was advised not to take cabs in from the airport lest I be kidnapped and killed: Mini-buses were much safer. Restaurants were often the targets of Maoist guerrilla bombers. The mixture of devastating poverty, desperation and urban revolution was too much to take.

Once beautiful Lima, from where Spain ruled all Latin America, has become dilapidated and shabby. Paint peels off walls, rust runs down walls like bloodstains. Grass grows wild, rubbish piles up. Cooking fires fill the air with bluish haze that mixes with the sand that surrounds Lima — it is set amid one of the world's driest deserts.

Completing this dismal vista was the winter overcast, a thick blanket of low-lying, wet clouds. This grey shroud can block out the sun for months. And there is nothing quite so dreary or depressing as a normally sunny country deprived of sunshine.

Lima may yet survive. The new government of Alan Garcia is racing to head off the social and economic collapse of Peru. If the slums can be cleared, the city repainted, jobs restored, trade and commerce resumed, then Lima will return to life.

Each of these "ifs" is a problem as large as the Andes. Every day, more wretched Indians straggle down from the mountain, drawn to the illusory El Dorado of Lima.

If you are going to see the wonders in the Andes, book a through flight to Cuzco. Give thanks that you do not live in Lima.