

Designs on the Desert: Flying Over the Nazca Lines

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The pilots didn't really need to talk. By now everyone knew to look down whenever the plane banked into a turn. One time it was the Spider, outlined in gray against the brown shellacked rocks of the Nazca Plain below. The Hummingbird was the first object along the flight track, and some folks missed it. With practice, however, we all got better at spotting as the Pelican, Shark and Fish passed underneath. The shapes are enigmatic memorials to the Nazca people who crafted them -- and a hardy civilization -- out of this dry desert in southern Peru.



Earlier, at the airport, six passengers had piled into a single-engine Cessna





A flight in this Cessna Grand Caravan takes visitors from the airport at Ica, Peru, across the Nazca Plain. Photo courtesy of Steve Murray.

Grand Caravan. The two pilots, all business, got the plane into the air within minutes. It was already midday so there were no shadows, but that didn't matter. The gray lines and shapes of Nazca emerged from the darker desert rocks and were easy to spot.

The first figures appeared almost immediately, and the plane started a series of tight turns, first left, then right, to give everyone a good look and a good

photograph opportunity. The plane then straightened out, moved to the next set of figures and started maneuvering again. One or two passengers were a little uneasy from all the turning, but the endless succession of images kept them engaged at the windows with everyone else.

Nazca from the air is an encounter unique in travel -- a chance to view ancient sites without the distraction of traffic, signs, vendors or people. If such things are below, no one can see them. The flight lasts just over half an hour and then heads toward Ica Airport.

The Nazca Lines unfold across 190 square miles, so they're best seen and understood from the air. Pilots were the first to notice them in the 1920s during flights between Lima and Arequipa. A Peruvian archaeologist traveled in to investigate in 1927, but viewing from the desert floor he saw only some lines and not the larger figures.

In 1937 workers constructed part of the Southern Pan-American Highway through the lines without recognizing what they were. Today the plane leveled out as it headed to the next figure, giving passengers a chance to catch their breath and orient themselves. Even at 1,500 feet above the desert it's easy to get lost.

The Nazca Lines are geoglyphs - large drawings created by uncovering rocks. Like many deserts, ages of sun exposure have turned the Nazca Plain rocks a dull reddish-brown. Scraping a trench just a few inches deep, however, exposes an underlying layer of gray soil and leaves a clearly visible line in the ground. (The Mars Rover reveals similar gray soil as it digs through the red surface layer of that planet.) The challenge to

their builders was to keep the lines aligned correctly over long distances and in complex patterns; some shapes are as much as 2,000 feet across.

While scientists have a good understanding of how the lines were made, they're much less certain about why. There's virtually no wind to blow dust over this desert, so the shapes have remained visible and intact across centuries. The Nazca people, however, erased or wrote over many of the shapes, complicating efforts to interpret them. Archaeologists believe the designs were created between 500 B.C. and A.D. 500, with most completed after 200 B.C., an estimate backed up by carbon-dating of wooden marker stakes found at the ends of some lines.

This mystery has invited explanations of all kinds: fertility symbols, markers for astronomical events, guides to worship sites and navigation aids for interstellar travelers. The more fanciful speculations come with equally creative theories about Nazca construction technologies, including the use of primitive balloons for surveying. Today the only things in the air above Nazca are planeloads of tourists who glance between the ground and the geoglyph charts in their laps.

The Nazca Plain is 250 miles south of Lima. Driving here from the capital city takes more than six hours, so unless visitors have a lot of time to explore Peru, most opt to fly into the cozy Ica Airport, just northwest of Nazca itself. The flight stays close to the coast, so the trip is also an enjoyable opportunity to see some of the countryside from the ocean to the Andes.

Seeing the lines from the air is not the only part of a day tour, though. Most itineraries include an introduction to the surrounding area by bus or car, including nearby Huacachina and the Regional Museum of Ica. Huacachina is a small (population 115) village and local tourist resort built at an oasis set among high, cream-colored sand dunes. The dunes are popular for sand-boarding and dune-buggy rides.

The museum is a real treasure and would be worth the trip to Ica by itself. A little rustic by Lima standards, its crowded halls offer examples of pre-Incan artifacts such as mummies, pottery and textiles, perfectly preserved by the dry climate of the area. The Nazca civilization was preceded by the earlier Paracas culture that was responsible for some of the oldest geoglyphs. Elongated Paracas skulls - a likely genesis for many space-alien theories about Nazca - and examples of Paracas trepanation (surgery through a hole through the skull) skills are also on display. A one-day trip doesn't allow enough

time to do the museum justice.

There's enough time at the airport for lunch, talks about photographs and a walk around before catching the return plane. The flight reaches Lima in time for dinner, and there awaits a chance to enjoy yet another achievement from Ica. The region is also the source of Peru's famous Pisco brandy.

Countless books, magazine articles, movies and television programs still claim that the Nazca Lines were constructed as signals or landing runways for ancient aliens. These theories, however, don't give the ancient Nazca and Paracas peoples their due. People lived successfully in this high desert for thousands of years, and their survival alone was an achievement. Clearly, they felt that the rewards of such huge geoglyphs were worth the effort to craft them. When science finally understands their motivation, my guess is that it be more interesting than anything involving space travelers.

WHEN YOU GO

The most popular months to visit Peru are May through October, but the Nazca region is consistently dry and sunny, with some coastal clouds between April and November.

Single-day tours can be arranged out of Lima from \$580, including air. Some tours include a variety of regional sites in the same itinerary. Tours of the lines can also be arranged from Nazca or Ica for about \$110. Prebooking is advisable, as local touts can be aggressive and often untrustworthy.

View an introductory video of a Nazca flight at www.youtube.com/watch?v=CVWLL7iduPo.

If you're traveling by road, there is an observation tower along the Pan American Highway that offers a view of some of the Nazca desert shapes.

Steve Murray is a freelance travel writer. To read features by other Creators Syndicate writers and cartoonists, visit the Creators Syndicate website at www.creators.com.

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