

XPLORE - RESILIENCE

THE UROS ISLANDS, LAKE TITICACA, PERU



201915

EXPLORATION SUMMARY



Lake Titicaca, the world's highest navigable lake, is home to the Uros, the first indigenous tribe to settle in the Andes mountains. Seeking shelter from political uncertainty and prospective invasion by the Incas, the Uros secluded themselves by migrating to a floating archipelago of artificial islands which they constructed of totora, a thick reed native to the region. While the mobility of the floating village provided a sense of security, the strategy was ultimately unsuccessful in that the islands were confined to the lake's boundaries. Although Lake Titicaca is quite large, eventually the Incas found the Uru colony and forced taxation and enslavement of its people. Amazingly, the Uros survived the Incan conquest. Today, they still inhabit and maintain the artificial islands on the lake; however, a storm in the 1980s caused them to mobilize the archipelago from the center of the lake to an area closer to the Peruvian town of Puno. There, the Uros community continues to prove its resilience. The Uros maintain an environmentally-sustainable lifestyle dependent on the local reeds' versatility- using them as the primary construction material for their islands, homes, and boats, while also using them as food and for pain relief. As a result of their now less-remote location on the lake, an increase of interaction with the mainland has altered the Uru culture. Tourism provides the tribe an opportunity for financial growth and a more structured economical model; however, the increased wear and tear of tourists visiting their islands has caused both physical and cultural damage to their settlement.

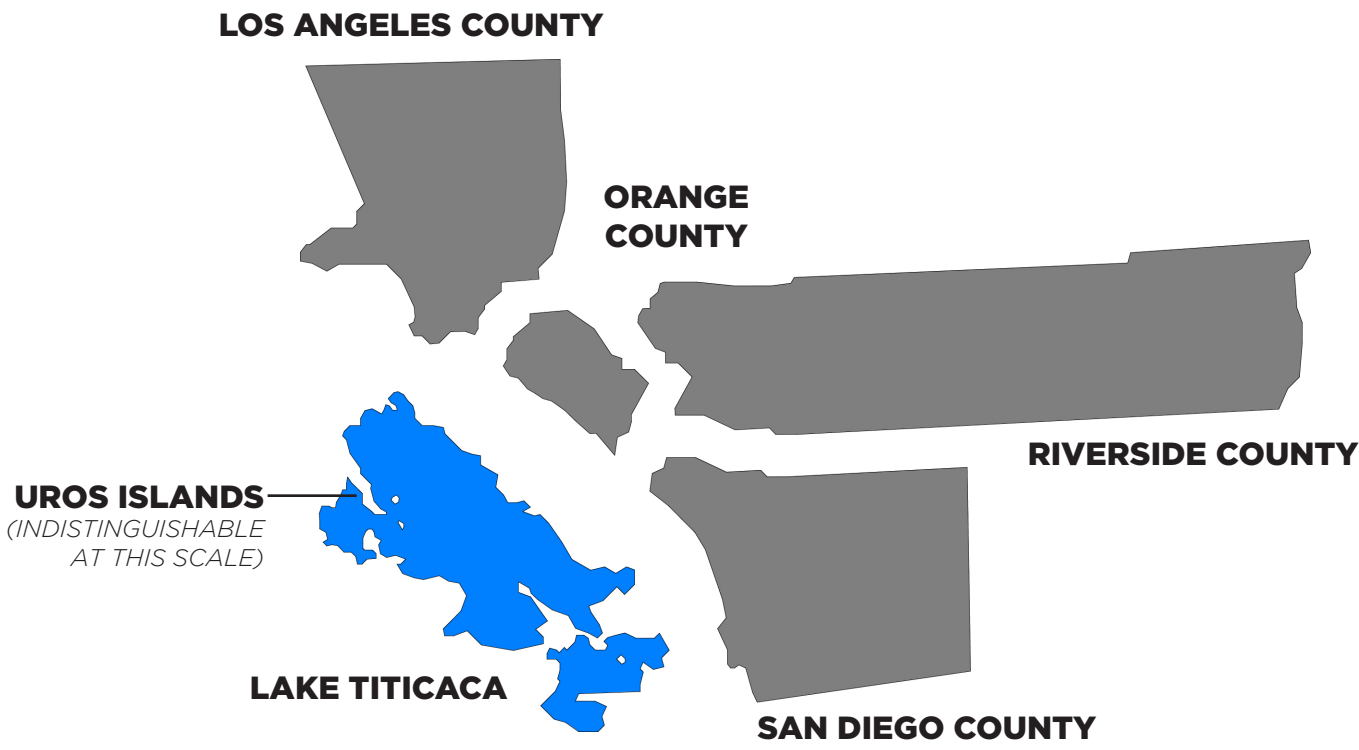
Travelling to the Uru colony would provide the opportunity to further explore and document the influences of modern civilization on the growth of an otherwise self-sustaining culture that has endured over 3700 years in a state of transience and isolation.



LOCATION



SIZE COMPARISON



INTRO

At twelve-thousand five-hundred feet above sea-level, Lake Titicaca, the highest navigable lake in the world, is home to one of the most resilient civilizations ever. The Uros were the first people to settle in the Altiplano region of the South American Andes. In a 2013 study by National Geographic, current members of the Uros-based tribes around Lake Titicaca were confirmed to be descendents of the original settlers from roughly three-thousand seven hundred (3700) years ago. Throughout their settlement of the Andes mountain range, the Uros have survived numerous forms of adversity. But now, as modern civilization and technology strengthen in the area, they face a new set of challenges.



HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

There is much mystery behind the origins of the first Uros people in the Andes; and even the current population has faced scrutiny over the authenticity of its now-confirmed ancestry. But certainly, the decision to isolate themselves in the Andes mountain range has challenged the Uros tribe in many ways. For a long time, the rough environment protected the Uros' secluded villages, but eventually, other tribes made their way up the mountains. The neighboring Aymara tribe greatly influenced the Uros's way of life. With them, the Aymara brought their own culture, language and experiences. As they moved closer to the Uros, the Aymara began trading and intermarrying the Uros. Slowly, the Uros gave way to Aymaran traditions and began to lose their own.

Historically, the biggest foreign influence on the Uros tribe was the Incan empire, which reigned between the mid-1430's to 1530's A.D. As the Incan command grew closer to them, the Uros concentrated their settlement to the land around Lake Titicaca; there, they began manufacturing a series of artificial islands. The islands, made of reed native to the lake, were designed to be readily mobile to navigate along the lake as defense from the Incas. Consequently, the Uros culture adapted to its new surroundings by taking on a more sustainable lifestyle based on the available resources of the lake.

TIMELINE

circa 1687 BC: **Uros tribe begins to inhabit the South American Andes mountains.**

circa 200 BC: First settlements near Lake Titicaca are established.

circa 800 AD: The Aymara tribe makes its way to the land around Lake Titicaca.

1430s AD - 1530s AD:

Incas reign over the Andes, taxing & sometimes enslaving other tribes, including the Uros and Aymara tribes around Lake Titicaca. Uros original language, Puquina, is replaced by that of the Aymara.

1530s AD - 1570s AD:

European colonization of the Andes begins.
Incan empire is conquered by Spain.

1530s AD - 1824 AD:

As European nations continuing conquering South America, the Viceroyalty of Peru serves as capital for Spanish colonies.

1824 AD: Peru declares independence.

1825 AD: Bolivia declares independence.

1824 AD - 1839 AD:

Intermittent battles continue between individual republics and the royalists. Ultimately, royalists are defeated.

1986 AD:

A major storm devastates the Uru islands, which were typically about nine miles from shore. The Uros rebuild in different areas around the lake. The largest development being on the western edge, near Puno, Peru.

2013 AD:

A study by National Geographic confirms that the Uru people presently in Lake Titicaca are descendents of the first settlers of the Andes, from roughly 3700 years prior.

PRESENT:

The Uru islands are a growing tourist destination. Uru populations:

Peru, 2000 (including 1200 still on reed islands)
Bolivia: 2600

THE UROS NOW

Today, the Uru tribe has become a destination-community for tourists from around the globe. Tourism provides the Uros an opportunity for financial growth and economic structure that they have not previously experienced. They still depend largely on their immediate natural surroundings for food, clothing, and building materials; however, they are starting to integrate technological upgrades wherever possible. The perils of transforming into a host-community have manifested themselves in the everyday lives of the Uros. Since they are still a relatively small community, and host countless visitors every year, the Uros lifestyle has focused itself on accomodating their guests and their guests' interests.





HOW TO PERSEVERE

By spending an extended period of time around Lake Titicaca, I am seeking to experience and document the current state of the Uros. I hope to answer questions such as: 'How has technology benefitted/ hurt the Uru culture?' 'What impact has tourism had on everyday life?' 'How have tribal/ familial/ gender roles changed due to more frequent exposure to other cultures?' In visiting multiple islands around the lake, I hope to uncover the differences between the various sub-tribes and peek into their culture away from tourism. Despite being small in numbers and often secluded, the Uros have persevered nature and man in the Andes for over 3700 years; I am eager to find signs of their culture's continued strength.

Making this voyage would allow me to immerse myself in an atmosphere unlike any I have ever encountered. Not only would I be travelling to a community that has prided itself in being secluded, but I, myself, would be away from everything familiar to me. This would be my first travel experience to a new continent and a way of life very foreign to my own. My hopes are to return home a much stronger and resilient individual, and inspire others to pursue exploring more remote places and cultures.





DOCUMENTATION STRATEGY

In order to best experience the Uros culture, I will immerse myself in as many ways possible from diet to housing and recreation. My focus throughout will be on maintaining presence and awareness in this unfamiliar socio-cultural environment. While visiting the Uros people, I want to take an active part in reducing my own footprint by learning & helping to maintain the islands, prepare and cook meals, and produce totora reed products. In social moments, I will center my attention on the customs and interactions being presented to me; meanwhile, during moments of isolation, I will translate and document the tactile presence the culture and its physical environment provides. Ultimately, my intentions are to compile photographs, videos, artifacts and sketches into a presentation that will stimulate and encourage others to find beauty in isolation and motivate them to experience their own resilience-building adventure.

