



## The Floating Islands of the Uros

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What you see in the picture is a boat made entirely of reeds, not any reeds but totora reeds which grow abundantly in the shallow waters of Lake Titicaca. And the boatman is a Uros.

The Uros' lives are totally interwoven with the totora reeds. They harvest the reeds and use them to make not just boats, but everything from the islands on which they live to the huts which give them shelter to little model boats to sell to tourists.

Lake Titicaca, reputedly the highest navigable lake in the world, is situated between Peru and Bolivia in South America. The lake has an area of about 8,500 sq. km. and its water surface is at about 3,810m above sea level. About 55% of the lake is within Peru's territory and the rest belongs to Bolivia, which maintains a naval fleet in the lake! In the Aymara language (one of Peru's languages), Titicaca means grey or stone puma.

Puno, with a population of about 120,000, is the largest Peruvian settlement beside Lake Titicaca. A large area of the lake within the Bay of Puno is covered by totora reeds. The Uros live among the reeds, forming a unique community of 23 floating islands with some 200 families and about 1,500 people.

The Uros have intermarried with Aymara-speaking Indians over the years and no pure-blooded Uros remain today. They have always been a small tribe and they began their unusual floating existence a few centuries ago to isolate themselves from the Collas and the Incas.

My friends and I visited one of the floating islands. It measured 45m long by 18m wide with 6 related families living on it. One of the men gave us a demonstration on how a floating island was constructed.

Reed roots, which are entangled into a huge mass, are dug up from the shallow lake bed in slabs of 5m x 12m x 1m thick. Such

slabs float. Holes are made in the slab along the edges, a piece of rope made of natural fibre with a piece of wood tied to one end is passed through each hole, and the slabs are tied together in a criss-cross pattern to form a large floating platform. Layers of reed stems are then placed in criss-cross fashion on the platform. The whole raft is anchored to the bed of the lake for stability.

During the dry season, a new layer of reeds is added to the island every 3 months, whereas in the wet season a new layer is added every month. The raft becomes thicker and thicker over time until it is so thick that it touches the lake bed. It is then abandoned and a new island is constructed.

A floating island's useful life is usually between 15 and 18 years.

If the families living on a floating island quarrel and their differences cannot be reconciled, the island can actually be sawn into 2 separate islands. They can be rejoined later. ■

