

Taquile, Peru: Model Tourism



With the success of tourism in the island of Taquile, Taquileños increasingly have become professional motorboat builders. In the past, they were renowned for building wooden and reed sailboats for travel to the mainland to buy dry goods and between islands to trade crops for reeds, fish, and waterfowl. A group of Taquileño families pool resources to commission and run a motorboat.

Photo by Elayne Zorn

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More than 13,000 feet above sea level on the Peruvian side of Lake Titicaca, at the heart of the Americas, lies the small island of Taquile. Set amid the sparkling blues of the lake and facing the snow-capped Andes, this beautifully terraced island is home to 1,200 Quechua-speaking peasants, whose distinctive red, black, and white dress represents some of the finest weavings made and worn today in Peru. Taquileños take pride in preserving the ways of their Inka ancestors. Islanders also take pride in controlling a complex of tourist enterprises, although the island still lacks such basic services as electricity and running water.

Tourism is new in Taquile. Twenty years ago Taquileños only infrequently traveled by sailboat to the mainland 17 miles away, yet recently islanders traveled to Europe and the United States. Twenty years ago visitors were rare and even the local priest arrived only once a year, but today up to 1,000 tourists visit monthly. Twenty years ago Taquileños exercised no power outside their island; today they are known internationally for their community control and equitable distribution of benefits from their small-scale tourist enterprises.

Quechua-speaking settlers were first sent to Taquile by the Inkas. Following the Spanish invasion of what is now Peru, Spanish landowners took possession of Taquile, leaving islanders to survive as peons on their increasingly eroding lands. In the 1930s, the national government of Peru used Taquile as a political prison. One prisoner befriended by the Taquileños, Sánchez Cerro, became Peru's president and eventually helped Taquileños in their struggle to regain their lands. Starting in the 1940s, through purchase, Taquile became the first community on the Peruvian side of the lake to obtain title to its land. In the 1960s Taquileños began to produce their exquisite textiles on a commercial basis. When the first backpacking tourists arrived in the mid-1970s, Taquileños mobilized to create tourist services. In the process islanders developed new crafts and learned new skills, such as how to build and operate motorboats. Taquileños also have gained assistance from individuals of several nations and organizations, including the Inter-American Foundation.

Tourism has brought economic benefits to these subsistence farmers, whose nation suffers from civil war and economic crises. Taquile has been transformed from one of the poorest communities on the lake to one of the better off. Tourism also has brought problems, however, as islanders must continue to resist efforts by outsiders to gain control of Taquileño enterprises. Moreover, Taquileño women, who like other Andean women play essential and respected roles in their society, appear to be losing some social standing vis-à-vis men as a result of men's increased access to money and other economic development.

Nonetheless, Taquileños' control of their land and of all tourist enterprises makes them a model for other communities who also seek to combine innovations and appropriations of technology with traditional forms of power sharing and decision making.

— Elayne Zorn