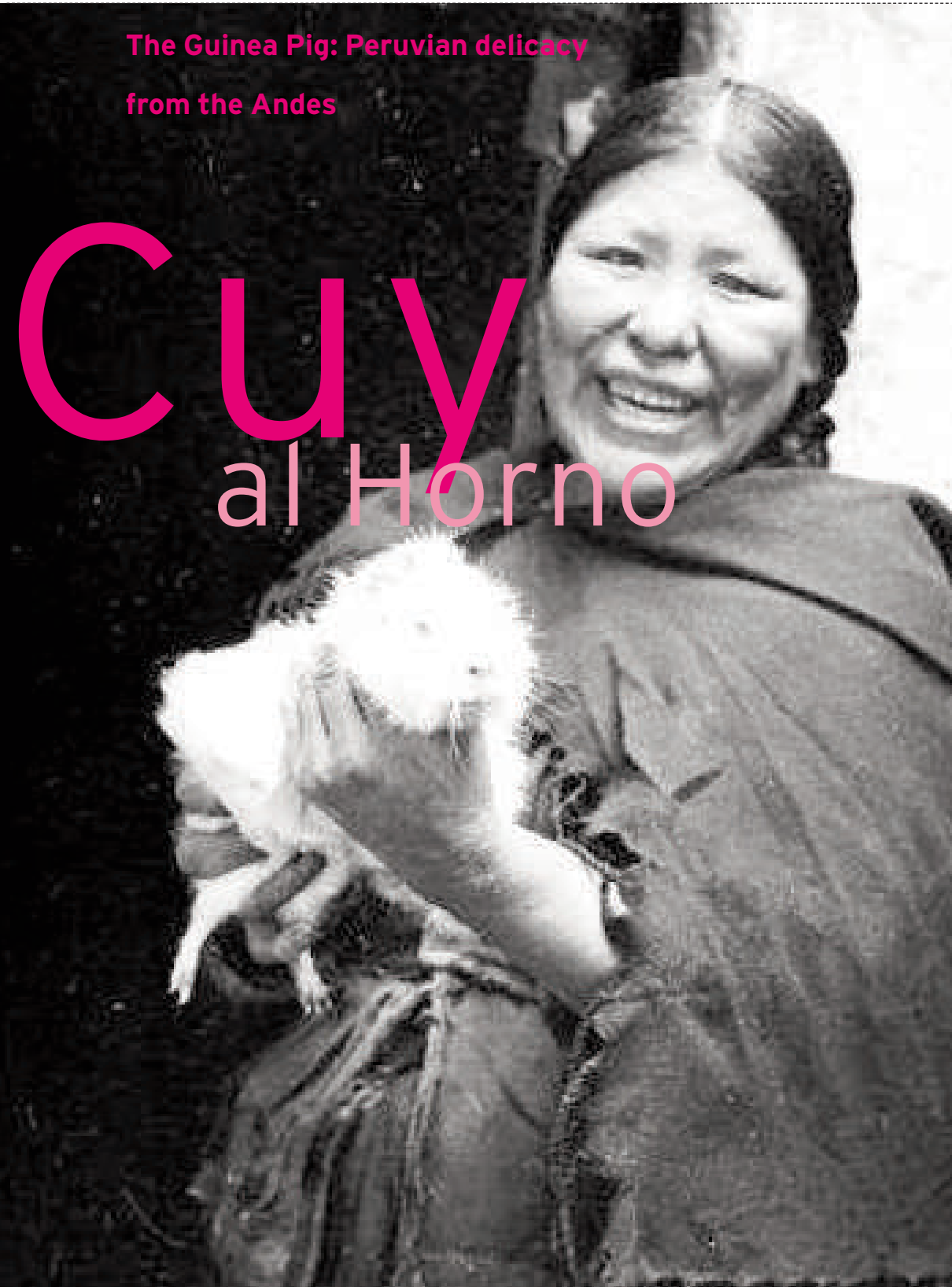


The Guinea Pig: Peruvian delicacy from the Andes

Cuy al Horno



The mud-stained window serves as the film screen on which beautiful images are being projected. As we bounce up and down along unpaved, winding roads, the bus climbs up mountain after mountain. In the small patches of pasture, herds of alpacas graze. Below us, at the base of steep ravines, wild swirling rivers rage. Men and women in colourful garments are sitting on stone walls in front of their small houses. In the towns children wearing woollen hats run alongside our bus and fruit merchants sell pineapple and papaya from carrier cycles.

The road from Lima to Cuzco is long. It's a fourteen-hour trip. But the landscape of the Andes is so varied and fascinating that I don't mind my sore knees, squeezed in between the seats, or the toilet on the bus being the filthiest I've ever seen. The Lonely Planet Guide advises you to take the bus, even though it takes you about thirteen hours longer than a plane ride. 'The difference in altitude between the lowland and the high mountains can cause dizziness, headache and altitude sickness. Therefore it's better to go by bus rather than by plane, so your body can gradually adjust to the 3000 metre difference', the book says. Besides, being driven through the Andes is a rather welcome experience after the madness of the chaotic traffic in Lima, Peru's capital. But after a few hours my whole body hurts. These chairs were not made for long-legged Westerners. In addition, the buses are so old that both the seat springs and the car suspension have vanished completely. Just when I'm about to give in to the pain in my back and the regret of not having taken a plane, the Holy Valley stretches out in front of me, with ruins here and there as though someone had casually dropped them in the landscape. The valley breathes of long-gone wealth and rituals. Once this was all part of the mighty Inca Empire. Suddenly the city appears before me. The plaza with its cathedral and thousands of red roofs. Below me lies the city for which I have made this hell of a journey. Cuzco lies at my feet. There I will be eating guinea pig.

My hotel is situated in the heart of the old city centre. From Plaza de Armas, the central square in almost every Peruvian city, steep steps lead up the hill. The walls consist of large, polished blocks, carved from the rocks. They fit like a jigsaw puzzle, forming a foundation so strong and solid that it survived every earthquake in over a thousand years. They are reminders of the Inca era. The steps and the houses clearly show their colonial past. The red roof tiles are reminders of the Spanish conquest. Women sitting on the steps are knitting, using multicoloured woollen threads. They sell sweaters with lama images, hats with little pom-poms and skilfully crocheted finger puppets shaped like tropical animals. The roof terrace offers a magnificent view over the Plaza de Armas and its surrounding streets. On the square you find people by the fountain reading their books, street urchins selling postcards and homeless children begging for candy and money. Backpackers and tourists crowd together in Procuradores, the street known as

‘Gringo Alley’ because of the many tourist shops. They come to Cuzco to visit the Holy Valley, see the cathedral, walk the Inca trail, or seek entertainment in the city’s countless bars and clubs. I, too, have come here for these reasons. But there is more. Close to Cuzco lies the small village of Tipón. That’s where I want to go, for Tipón is known for its heavenly cuy al horno.

At Plaza de Armas, three taxi drivers offer me a ride. I pick the taxicab that looks best. The cabs in Peru are moving wrecks. The doors and bonnets are full of dents and scratches and the headlights never work simultaneously. But the horns never fail. Hooting and honking, the cab forces its way out of the busy city centre. Part of the floor of this car is missing. With increasing speed the road flashes by below me as the car leaves the city and drives through the hills surrounding Cuzco. I see the wildly dangling figure of the Virgin Mary hanging from the rear-view mirror and hope for the best. ‘Para las ruínas o el cuy?’ the cabdriver asks after I have called out my destination. He looks at me for a long time. ‘For the guinea pig’, I quickly reply, hoping he will turn his eyes back on the road. A truck filled with chickens honks as it rushes by. ‘Have you ever had guinea pig before?’ he continues. I shake my head. ‘Ha! A virgin!’ he laughs, revealing four brown teeth. When I finally arrive safely in Tipón, I see why everyone calls it ‘guinea pig town’. Tipón consists of one long street, and in front of each house is a large sign that reads cuy al horno. Everyone has a round, whitewashed oven built against the outside wall and outside every house there are a few wooden benches and tables covered with red-and-white chequered sheets. Tipón looks like one big guinea pig restaurant. I don’t know which restaurant to choose, so I take my chance and pick the nearest one.

The restaurant is owned by a short, chubby Indian woman dressed in wide skirts. She has a friendly face and wears her jet-black hair in braids. ‘One person?’ she asks, sweeping the breadcrumbs from the table with her small hand. She brings me an ice-cold bottle of Cuzceña beer and disappears through the wooden door into the kitchen to prepare my meal. Shortly after, she returns and pokes in the oven from which delicious, spicy aromas are now rising. I search The Lonely Planet Guide for ‘guinea pig’; because all I know is that they eat guinea pig in Peru. I know nothing about marinades, herbs or spices, nor how they usually serve it. Filleted? Grilled, in pieces? In a römertopf? I grin at the memory of the disapproving faces of the other hotel guests when I told them about my guinea pig adventure. The guinea pig has not yet established itself as a tourist attraction. When I look up from my travel guide, the restaurant owner puts a steaming plate in front of me. ‘Que aproveche’, she says, and away she goes. Boiled potatoes, tagliatelle and stuffed green peppers are stacked on my plate in a big pile. On top of this pile lies...THE GUINEA PIG. In my whole life I have never seen a guinea pig this size. It is nothing like the cuddly little pets we know. This guy is the size of a giant rat. But maybe that’s just the image I have etched in my mind because the animal is staring at me in all its glory. Its teeth shining in its half-open mouth, its little ears blackened and its four legs

with tiny claws sticking out the lower part of its body. Suddenly I remember Chip and Dale, the two guinea pigs my brother and I held in a cage in the garden when we were kids. I can’t help but swallow audibly.

The woman interprets my hesitation differently. ‘You take its head and hind legs’, she explains. ‘Then you snap its spine with one quick move.’ Shivers run down my own spine when I hesitantly pick up the animal with both hands and bend its head and bottom toward each other. The spine proves to be too flexible to simply snap. I stick my fork in the tagliatelle to conceal my uneasiness. Then the woman comes to my rescue. With a huge knife she decapitates the animal. Then, with a second blow, she chops the guinea pig in half, lengthwise, revealing the inside of its belly, stuffed with herbs. She puts the head back on my plate, with its eyes toward me. ‘The ears are the best part,’ she says, triumphantly returning to the kitchen. With mixed feelings I tear off some of the tight skin from its body and put it in my mouth. It’s not the taste, it reminds me somewhat of rabbit and you can clearly taste the spices. The little meat that comes from the bones is nice and tender on the inside and crispy on the outside. It’s not any of those things. It is the look in its eyes and its mouth so wide open, that it seems as though it was screaming in fear or pain when it died. Its eyes are wide with fear. Scared and sad, the cuy looks up at me from my plate, and I start reminiscing. I think of the sappy grass we used to feed our guinea pigs. How they used to watch TV with us, patiently sitting on our shoulders. With every bite these images torture me and swallowing becomes increasingly difficult. But somehow I must be a good boy and finish my plate, just like when I was young.

There is a floor in the taxicab that takes me back. The ruins of Tipón flash by my window and the driver, who still has all his teeth, tells me all about the ingenious irrigation system the Incas made. The terraces are still intact and the way they are built against the hills is quite impressive. ‘How did you like your guinea pig?’ the driver asks. ‘It was all right’, I reply, tasting the meat in my mouth while my stomach revolts. ‘Don’t people in your country eat guinea pig?’ I shake my head. ‘In China they eat dog!’ the driver cries out, grimacing. ‘Can you imagine, eating your own dog?’ he adds.

I try to picture it. I see the Indian restaurant owner, this time with slant eyes, cutting a dog in half with a giant machete. No, I can’t imagine. Travelling is crossing boundaries. So is eating. For the time being my curiosity for culinary culture has been satisfied after my guinea pig experience. Moreover, Peru has much more to offer in the cultural field. So China has to wait for now. The cabdriver looks at me expectantly, awaiting my answer. He barely keeps his cab on the road as we approach a turn at full speed. Peruvian customs and habits? Some of them appeal to me more than others...