Steamboating Above the Clouds

All About Titicaca, the Highest Navigable Lake of the World, and Its Curious Surroundings.

It is as Big as Lake Erie and Twice as High as Mount Washington—How Steel Steamers Were Brought to It on Mashuks and Muleback over Andean Passes Higher than Pike's Peak—Its Sacred Islands and Their Unwanted Kins—The Traffic of the Lake and the Trip to Bolivia—Sailboats Which are Made of Silver—The Llama and Its Curious Habits—It Chews Its Cud and Its Spit is Worse than the Kick of a Mule—All About This Curious Animal, Which Clothes, Feeds and Warms the People Who Live on the Roof of the South American Continent.

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CHILLANI, Bolivia, May 31, 1898.—Steamboating above the clouds. Floating canoes over the highest navigable waters in the globe. Sailing under the glacial snows of the loftiest peaks of the Andes. Sailing on a lake larger than Lake Erie, and yet so high that you can see the earth more than around you and make you think you are on the very roof of the world. This is what I have been doing for the last day and night upon Lake Titicaca. As you read this letter you will be considering some trip to be one of an American excursion. It is always winter upon Lake Titicaca, a cold wet winter during half the year and a cold dry winter during the remainder. At some times the winds from the Andes sweep over the waters like a blizzard, and at others it is as calm as the dead sea in Palestine. The air is now as fresh as a sea breeze. It is cold and bracing, but so rare that I cannot walk fast without my heart jumping up into my throat. Some of you will soon be going to the Mount Washington hotel, which is the best of the kind. This great lake is more than twice as high as is the air at the top of Mount Washington, and it is situated amid scenery which is infinitely more grand. Some of you will be able to go to Lake Titicaca. This lake is almost as big as Lake Erie. It has a greater average depth than Lake Superior and its scenery is a combination of that of Lakes Lucerne and Geneva, as it is dotted with one of the most beautiful Lake Champlains the great lake trade ever during the winter. Titicaca never freezes.

I have spoken of the size of the Andes. Those of Titicaca have all of the beauties of the Andes and they are enhanced in other ways peculiarly their own. I cannot give you the sense of loftiness one feels here. The shores of Titicaca are about the shores of Titicaca like white upon which a curved or heavily blue the sky shows. Imagine the feel that arises while there are plainly visible and that if you would get through them you would go through the sky. The air is so clear that you can see for miles. Leaving Puno, Peru, I was shown the Island of Titicaca, fifty miles away, and now other islands came into view, which seemed to float upon the waters as though they were fairy isles or balls and not the outcroppings of the highest mountains of the world. Some of the islands are inhabited and there are cultivated to the very top of the mountains. If the United States could get as much from the parts of Peru through which I have traveled, where every available inch is cultivated, it would be a fortune. Some of the islands are inhabited by the descendants of the Incas. The people are mostly Indians, but in the possibility of the atmosphere, but they were the ancestors which I have never seen upon other waters.

AN UNKNOWN INLAND SEA.

You know of Lake Titicaca from your geographies. They tell you it lies in the Andes about half way between the borders of Panama and Cape Horn. They tell you it is 12,500 feet above the sea. They represent the lake as oval in shape and state that it is 120 miles long, fifty-seven miles wide, and that it has an area of 3,200 square miles. Some of these statements are true. Others are all conclusions. The lake has not yet been carefully surveyed. It has great bays which never have been sounded, and it winds in and out in such a way that it is difficult to determine the exact shape of the lake. Some of the islands are inhabited by a people of beautiful scenes of islands, some trees and wood. In coming from Puno to Bolivia we sailed across the lake. My pilot was native which was in many places, the captain said, more than a few days ago. I have reason to, I believe, an average depth of something like 400 feet. Some parts of the bottom of Lake Titicaca have been sounded, and the captain told me that if he should land upon a certain rock of Titicaca there he would have to cast his anchor in 400 feet of water. There is a body of water like this at an altitude of more than two miles above the sea. Lake Titicaca has 300 other lakes on its crest in a belt which not to Tibet is the loftiest inhabited plateau of the world. Imagine that you have taken a mighty dagger and thrust on the rule and over a pine which is nearly three miles above the sea to slit to it and you have a lake like Lake Erie above Lake Titicaca. You must add, however, that while it is fed by the streams and rains it has no outlet to the ocean, no visible outlet to other oceans, but rivers run into it, but only one of any size. Lake Titicaca is the Dead Sea of the Andes, which connects it with its little sister lake, Lake Aroquipa, which is 12,000 feet above the sea.