

A New Craft Beer Adventure in the Peruvian Andes

By Tony Dunnell

Mountains! Unbelievable mountains! Some of the best in the world,” says Ted Alexander of what drew him to Huaraz, a city of some 130,000 people high in the Andes Mountains of northern Peru. “I love seeing the mountains from almost everywhere.”

At 10,013 feet, Huaraz is one of Peru’s trekking and climbing hotspots. People come here from all over the world to climb the peaks of the Cordillera Blanca, home to Peru’s highest point, Mount Huascarán. Views of snowcapped mountains abound all over Huaraz. The majesty of the glaciated peaks, which soar to over 22,000 feet directly east of the city, dominates the skyline. To the west, the Cordillera Negra also offers a stunning backdrop, especially during the rainy season, when the rolling mountains are lush with grass and shrubs.

But for Ted, the views are not all that make Huaraz special. The presence of small, independent shops and restaurants is also a major plus. “I love that I buy most of our groceries from tiny stores where we know the owners. I love that there aren’t huge box stores everywhere. Sadly, in most U.S. towns and cities, gone are the mom-and-pop-type businesses. You’re hard pressed to dine in a restaurant or shop for groceries in a store where you’re on a first-name basis with the owner. But in Huaraz, we still enjoy the sense of knowing from whom we are buying our groceries. We know the names of the people whose dreams and inspirations have created the restaurants we eat at. This is one of the many things I love about Peru.”

Now Ted, 43, has made his own mark on Huaraz. He founded the Sierra Andina Brewing Company here in 2011, helping to kick-start the Peruvian craft-beer scene. There are now more than 40 microbreweries across the country. Sierra Andina is among the best of them, with popular beers such as the citrusy Huaracina Pale Ale and the light and mellow Inti Golden Ale.

“There were several reasons why the idea for a brewery came about,” says Ted,

who lives in Huaraz with his Peruvian wife, Jenn, and their sons Cole, 10, and Noah, 7. “I had become a father. Having worked as a climbing and kayak guide and outdoor instructor since I was 21, I was looking for a new adventure, something that would offer me a new learning curve and allow me to spend more time with my new family.

“I was nosing around at several options, but the idea of a brewery seemed by far the most exciting. I loved a good beer and was intrigued by the science of brewing. I built a small makeshift home-brew kit in my house and began to learn to brew.”

Starting his own brewing company was a challenge. “From raising the capital to start, to figuring out the legal structure of the entity, to learning about beer, to sourcing all the equipment, to wondering if the beer will even sell, regardless of how good it tastes... the list goes on.” But Sierra Andina is today one of the best-known craft breweries in Peru, with its beer sold in cities such as Lima, Arequipa, and Cusco.

“Thankfully, the brewery is doing very well,” says Ted. “We are growing fast, and we have a network of distributors that have done a terrific job getting our beer into the restaurants, stores, hotels, and bars in the

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In northern Peru, Ted found the perfect place to indulge his passions for climbing and brewing.

towns and cities where they work. The vast majority of our customers are Peruvians, although expats enjoy it, as well.”

In 1996, Pennsylvania native Ted (who has a passion for climbing) and his sister Dora took a road trip through Central and South America. This first awakened his sense of awe for Peru.

“I was climbing in Mexico and I met a Mexican climber who recommended Huaraz. He wrote it on a small piece of paper which I stuck in my wallet. A few weeks later I decided to head to South America and find this town, whose name I still could not pronounce correctly. I was hooked. The powerful and intriguing history...the ruggedness of the geography... the llama, condor, and puma.... It really remains for me a wild and wonderful country.” In 2010 he settled permanently in Peru.

Today, Sierra Andina helps fund a very comfortable life for Ted and his family. “You can live a very happy life here, earning far less than the same life would cost in the States,” says Ted. “Things such as the cost of labor, vegetables, and transport is refreshingly inexpensive. A full day’s wage for a mason, mechanic, or plumber rests at \$24. You can easily find terrific, three-course lunches for between \$1.75 and \$3.

“A huge bonus that we are extremely grateful for here in Peru is the luxury of having a wonderful woman who helps clean our house and cook our food. In the States this would not be possible. But here—for \$400 a month—it is.”

And with the Cordillera Blanca mountain range looming in his back yard, Ted and Jenn are never short of places to explore in their spare time. “Before the kids were born, my wife and I would head out on climbs literally every time we had a few days off. We would find peaks that had little to no information about them and go explore them. Sometimes we made it to the summit, but definitely not always! Now, with the kids, we prefer trekking in the valleys. Often we get donkeys for the kids to ride while we hike or bike. They love it and we get to actually cover some ground. We camp a lot with them—and they are starting to rock climb.”

Ted has a few tips for people considering Peru as a business option. “Peru takes time, it takes patience, and anger seldom accomplishes anything. So my advice: Learn to love Peru, stay humble, stay enchanted by the small things.” ■