

Eiffel in Peru

Earlier this year I was in Iquitos, Peru. It's one of the more isolated cities of the world, located on the Amazon River miles from the nearest paved road and accessible most of the time only via boat or plane. A bit more than a century ago, in the days before synthetic rubber, it was one of the continent's wealthier cities, home to rubber barons and their immense fortunes gathered from the natural resources of the surrounding jungle. It's now a decaying river port, down on its heels, but still a center of the tropical lumber trade and perhaps soon to see another boom in what are reputed to be vast oil and gas reserves hidden beneath the rainforest.

As a tourist destination, Peru is most often associated with the Inca and Machu Picchu, or perhaps the ruins of the several advanced civilizations that thrived on the Pacific coast prior to the coming of the Conquistadors in the sixteenth century. But to the amazement of many, myself included, Peru is home to perhaps the greatest existing concentration of the works of Gustave Eiffel, the French engineer whose iconic Parisian tower bears his name.



I developed an interest in all this about four years ago when I was traveling in Arica, Chile. It's the country's northernmost town and until the 1880s (and the War of the Pacific) was a part of Peru. Dominating the city's center is the Cathedral of San Marcos, a prefabricated iron structure made by Eiffel *et cie.* in France. It was transported by ship and assembled in Arica in 1876. About four months ago I was in Iquitos and saw the famed *Casa Fierro* (Iron House), again a work of Eiffel's company that was shipped and assembled amidst the jungle during the heady days of the rubber boom in 1889.

And there is more. Peru appears to have had the greatest concentration of Eiffel's work in the Americas. His works include the cathedral, a fountain and gas works in Tacna, the Bolivar Bridge, San Camilo Market and Fenix Theatre in Arequipa, the *Casa de Fierro* in Iquitos, a jetty at Chala, and several of the bridges on the Lima to Oroya rail line. He is reputed to have designed the Museo de Arte in Lima. Many structures have been lost to time, but there are still enough to see to make it worth a journey.

Someone needs to write a book on the subject. If any wants to join me on an "Eiffel in Peru" tour, let me know and we'll work something out.

