

**Qoyllur Rit'i festival**  
***When You Wish Upon A Star Snow***



Lost among the jagged peaks of the Andes, ornately dressed pilgrims dance with such an intense fervor it's hard to believe that the oxygen percent is half what it is a sea level.

They have come from across Peru and even Bolivia with the hope of making their material dreams a reality. Seamlessly blending Catholicism and Andean animism, they pray to their unique holy trinity: Jesus, Pachamama (mother earth), and the Apus (mountain gods).

Here, where for centuries typically conflicting religions, chilling subzero temperatures, and the force of globalization have been no match for devotion and tradition, the people face a new environmental enemy that threatens to melt away their sacred landscape. Welcome to Qoyllur Rit'i where the Andes laugh and cry.



The yearly pilgrimage to Qoyllur Rit'i, or the Star Snow Festival, takes place in the bucolic Andes, a two-hour drive from Cusco, Peru. Pilgrims of all ages and sizes trek 10 kilometers into thin air from Mahuayani (4200m) to the Sinakara Valley (4700m) – close to the elevation of Europe's highest peak.



The festival provides an opportunity for the indigenous people like the Quechua to maintain their sacred traditions, which are under increasing threat from globalization.



In recent years, the number of attendees has surged. Up to 100,000 people are estimated to have come during the five days of festivities this year, some coming from as far away as Bolivia. Families crowd tightly into tents while some simply wrap themselves in blue tarp.



At Qoyllur Rit'i, the Catholic religion and the animist Andean religion are miraculously merged. People wait for hours for just a moment to worship a boulder on which the image of Christ appeared in 1780, reportedly after the death of a shepherd boy later believed to be a saint. The location had spiritual significance to the locals long before the Spanish arrived in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.



Pilgrims come to represent their particular region or "nation" – each with its own distinct traditions, dances, and costumes. Color and ostentation are key as being noticed among the mass is a matter of pride. Enthusiasm is kept at a consistent high.







Speaking in a falsetto voice, ukukus are mythical figures representing the llama herders that work near the glaciers high up in the Andes. They are the festival's ultimate authority, armed with a whip that they use indiscriminately to maintain order. "Take off your hat!" I was scolded after getting smacked by an ukuku whip for unwittingly covering my head during a religious procession.









Before the arrival of Europeans and their horses in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, llamas did all the work their equestrian counterparts do today. It was thus greatly respected, as were those who were in charge of them (the ukukus).



Make wishes come true by buying a replica of the object of your desire. Houses, cars, diplomas, and hard currency are among the most common buys. 40,000 dollars can be had for just 1 Peruvian sol (\$0.37). Symbolic plots of land measuring half a square meter in size can be bought and a notary will provide a deed. Mini bottles of fake champagne, confettis, and firecrackers are then used to commemorate the occasion.



With dreams of one day driving a tractor, Carlos bought a toy version of this construction vehicle. In order to keep it in mint condition, he preserves it in its original plastic wrapping. He brings it to a cross to pray to Jesus to make his dream a reality.



The festival attracts fortune tellers, shamans, and vendors of a wide range of remedies. This young man sells donkey fat that purportedly alleviates joint pain. Others have monkeys or parakeets that predict the future.





Taking place under a full moon and a star spangled sky, Qoyllur Rit'i never sleeps. Booming fireworks and drum rhythms resonate through the valley all night. Alcohol is officially forbidden but late night socializing is encouraged.



As temperatures quickly drop below 0 after sunset, the pilgrims dance with a heightened fervor in order to stay warm. Here, ukukus whip each other in a ritual dance, at once bearing the pain of Jesus and exercising their role as castigator.



At 3AM on the final night, the ukukus undertake a grueling hike up to 5000m high sacred glaciers. Only they are fit to battle the evil spirits of the damned, or condenados, that are said to live in this harsh environment. Arriving a little before sunrise, they pray to the Apus (mountain gods) and Pachamama (mother earth).



As an exhausting act of devotion, they used to carry off large chunks of ice and walk kilometers back to their homes. Now, due to the rapid rate at which the glacier is melting, this is strictly forbidden. They must settle for spending a few hours in its presence.



One veteran ukuku breaks off the tiniest piece of glacier and eats it. The water is thought to have physically and spiritually purifying properties. Since the banning of taking chunks of ice home, some have begun to bring rocks and place them on the glacier as an offering for their wish. According to mountain rescue personnel, this speeds the melting process as the rocks heat up under the daylight.



The effects of global warming are especially noticeable in this environment. There is an empathy that underlies the deep connection of the pilgrims to the glacier. "When I come here now, it makes me sad," says one devotee. "Ten years ago, this glacier covered the whole mountain. Ten years from now, it will probably be gone."

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