A thousand years before the Inca, in the deserts of Peru where rainfall is almost nonexistent, lived a civilization so advanced they’d figured out how to use wind to pump water.

The Nazca people were fantastic artists, famous among anthropologists and ancient art collectors for their textiles and ceramics. But they were also brilliant engineers. Over generations, they constructed a sophisticated water system.

They trenched and tunneled into the gravelly water table of the Andean foothills, then built underground aqueducts, lined with smooth river stone, to move the water down to them.

Miles of these tunnels supplied their towns and irrigated their fields in the coastal desert. Along them, they constructed broad spiraling holes called ojos, or eyes, some of them 50 feet in width.

These served as access portals for the Nazca to descend into, clean and maintain the aqueducts.

Recently, a team of scientists discovered that the ojos’ spiral mouths, and their positioning, had a further purpose. They caught the prevailing winds and ducted them down into the system, using the increased air pressure to pump the water along.

It’s a system so well engineered and constructed that 36 of these aqueducts are still in service today, 1,500 years later, bringing water to a city that bears the name of these ancient architects: Nazca, Peru.
Background: Nazca Ojos

Synopsis: When we hear “Nazca,” most of us think about the Nazca Lines etched into the desert plains of southern coastal Peru, but, around 1,500 years ago, these ancient engineers also developed subterranean aqueducts that incorporated what may be the world’s first hydraulic pumping system. Spiral ojos are thought to have entrained prevailing winds to pump water underground from the Andean foothills toward Nazca villages and fields.

- The Nazca culture flourished in what is now southern Peru from around 200 BC to about AD 600 (the Incan civilization prospered in the region from around AD 1100–1572).
  - This civilization is most renowned for the mysterious Nazca Lines constructed over many generations on the wide desert plains of the Nazca Valley.
  - They were constructed by gouging 4–6 in (10–15 cm) deep grooves in the dark pebbled desert surface to expose underlying lighter material.
  - Used for religious ceremonies, they have persisted for many centuries in the arid climate.
  - The Nazca culture is also known for its pottery and textiles.

The Nazca Lines can be seen between the northern Ingenio River and the central Nazca River. Some of the best preserved puquios occur at the Cantalloc Aqueduct (marked by the brown dot) in the town of Nazca, Peru. The Pacific Ocean can be seen at the lower left.

Credit: Google Maps

References: Nazca Ojos
Puquios–Nazca, Peru | Atlas Obscura
The Ancient Peruvian Mystery Solved from Space | BBC
Researchers Believe They Uncovered the Purpose of Puquios | Phys.org
Researchers Discover Hydraulics Network | Interesting Engineering
Following the Ancient Nasca from Space | ResearchGate

Contributors: Juli Hennings, Harry Lynch
While Nazca artists created awe-inspiring crafts, around AD 450, Nazca engineers were busy working out how to supply this collection of chiefdoms with water in the exceedingly arid region, where annual rainfall is so scarce it cannot be measured.

- Researchers estimate that a fairly dense population of up to 25,000 Nazca people lived in a collection of small villages built on terraced hillside alongside irrigated fields of crops like cotton, beans and potatoes on nearby floodplains.
- Lacking rainfall, irrigation was accomplished by tapping into buried aquifers draining the Andean foothills within the gravelly alluvial fans that fill the valleys.
- Similar to qanats constructed in ancient Persia (modern Iran), Peru’s puquios include nearly horizontal subterranean aqueducts that tap into uphill aquifers, sloping gradually coastward toward settlements and fields and ending in open canals and reservoirs (cochas) used for irrigation.
- The open canals, subterranean aqueducts and access shafts of the puquio systems are rock lined and constructed without the use of mortar to enable better water percolation.

Open aqueducts and reservoirs are part of the Puquio system near Nazca, Peru.

References: Nazca Ojos

Puquios–Nazca, Peru | Atlas Obscura
The Ancient Peruvian Mystery Solved from Space | BBC
Researchers Believe They Uncovered the Purpose of Puquios | Phys.org
Researchers Discover Hydraulics Network | Interesting Engineering
Following the Ancient Nasca from Space | ResearchGate

Contributors: Juli Hennings, Harry Lynch
Background: Nazca Ojos

- Originally, the intricately designed ojos were just thought to provide access for maintenance, but scientists have discovered a different reason for the spirals.
- Prevailing winds blow downward into the spirals pushing water through the aqueduct toward the reservoirs.
- This vast hydraulic system may have been the first wind-driven pump for moving water at this scale on Earth, making water accessible year-round to these desert dwellers.
- Researchers have used multispectral satellite imagery to map the extent of excess moisture in the soil to demonstrate a network of puquios leading to Nazca settlements.
- Archaeological evidence shows that the area would not have been habitable during the Nazca period without access to water via the puquios.
- Today, 36 puquios are still in use, delivering water to residents of Nazca for more than 1,500 years.
- Ultimately, the Nazca civilization withered at the end of a 30-year drought around AD 500 and fell to the Wari people, who took over their settlements, artistic techniques and technological developments.

References: Nazca Ojos

Puquios–Nazca, Peru | Atlas Obscura
The Ancient Peruvian Mystery Solved from Space | BBC
Researchers Believe They Uncovered the Purpose of Puquios | Phys.org
Researchers Discover Hydraulics Network | Interesting Engineering
Following the Ancient Nasca from Space | ResearchGate

Contributors: Juli Hennings, Harry Lynch