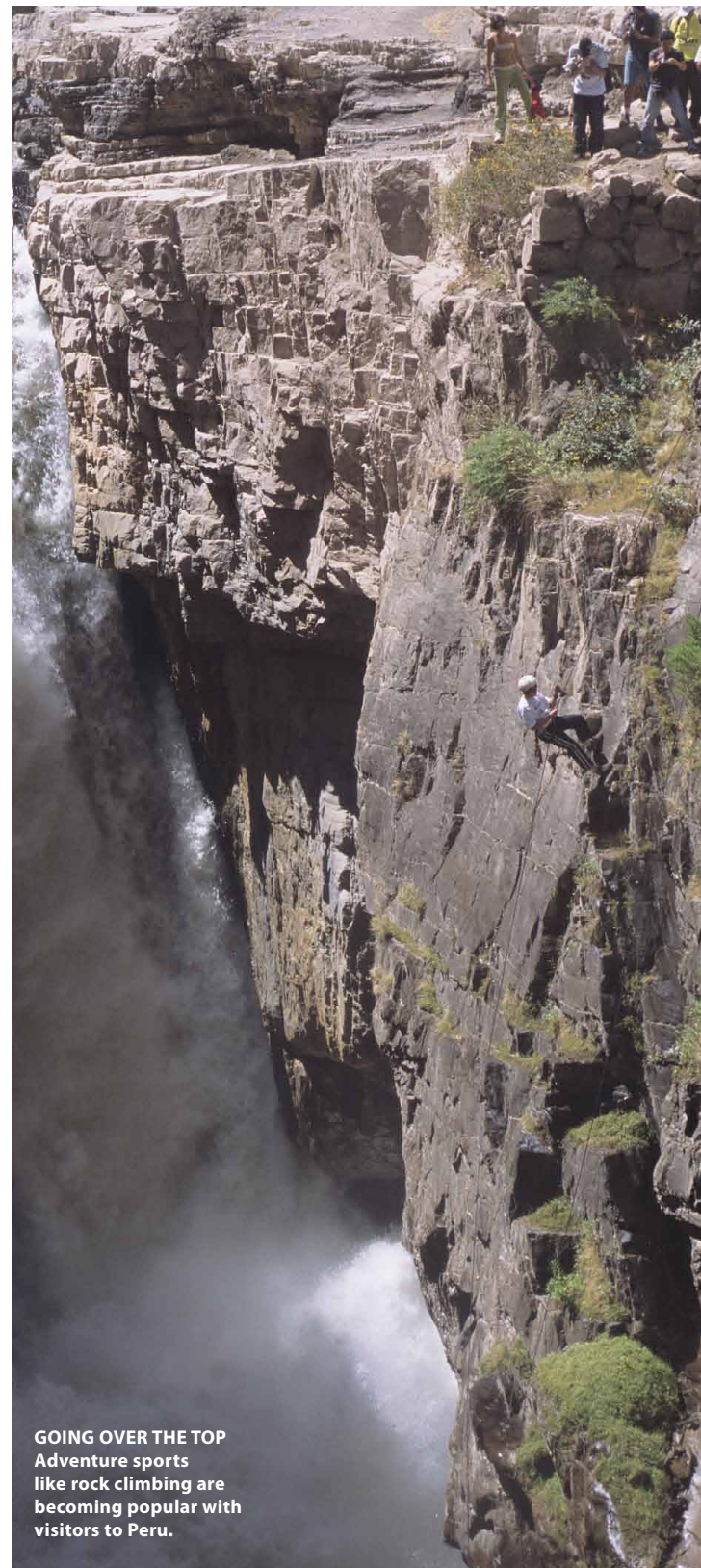


Peru scales new heights

It's safe, it's stylish and the seafood is unbeatable. Lucy Jones discovers why Peru should now be on every luxury traveller's hit list.



THE LARGE AND THE SMALL OF PERU
This page: Machu Picchu, a 15th century Inca site 2,430 metres above sea level in the mountains surrounding the Sacred Valley. Opposite page: a bird carving from the Chan Chan citadel built by the Chimú kingdom between 900-1450AD.



GOING OVER THE TOP
Adventure sports like rock climbing are becoming popular with visitors to Peru.

Five elements need to combine to entice luxury travellers to a new destination. Travellers need to feel safe, to get there (and get around) in comfort, to have their pick of the finest hotels, to eat delicious and exciting cuisine and to have some unforgettable experiences. Peru ticks all five boxes.

1. HOW TO GET TO AND AROUND PERU IN COMFORT

Yes Peru is a long way (close to 24 hours if you do it in one hit) but LAN Airlines has daily connections via Santiago, Chile so the trip is fairly painless. Especially if you're sitting up the pointy end with a pisco sour in hand. In 2008 LAN introduced a new premium business cabin on its Airbus A340s that fly the trans-Pacific route, replacing the traditional three cabin model. Premium business is a combination of first and business which means it's extra-spacious and the service is impeccable. In September 2011 LAN took over Brazilian airline TAM to create the world's second largest airline, meaning international connections and local flights within Peru are plentiful and reliable.

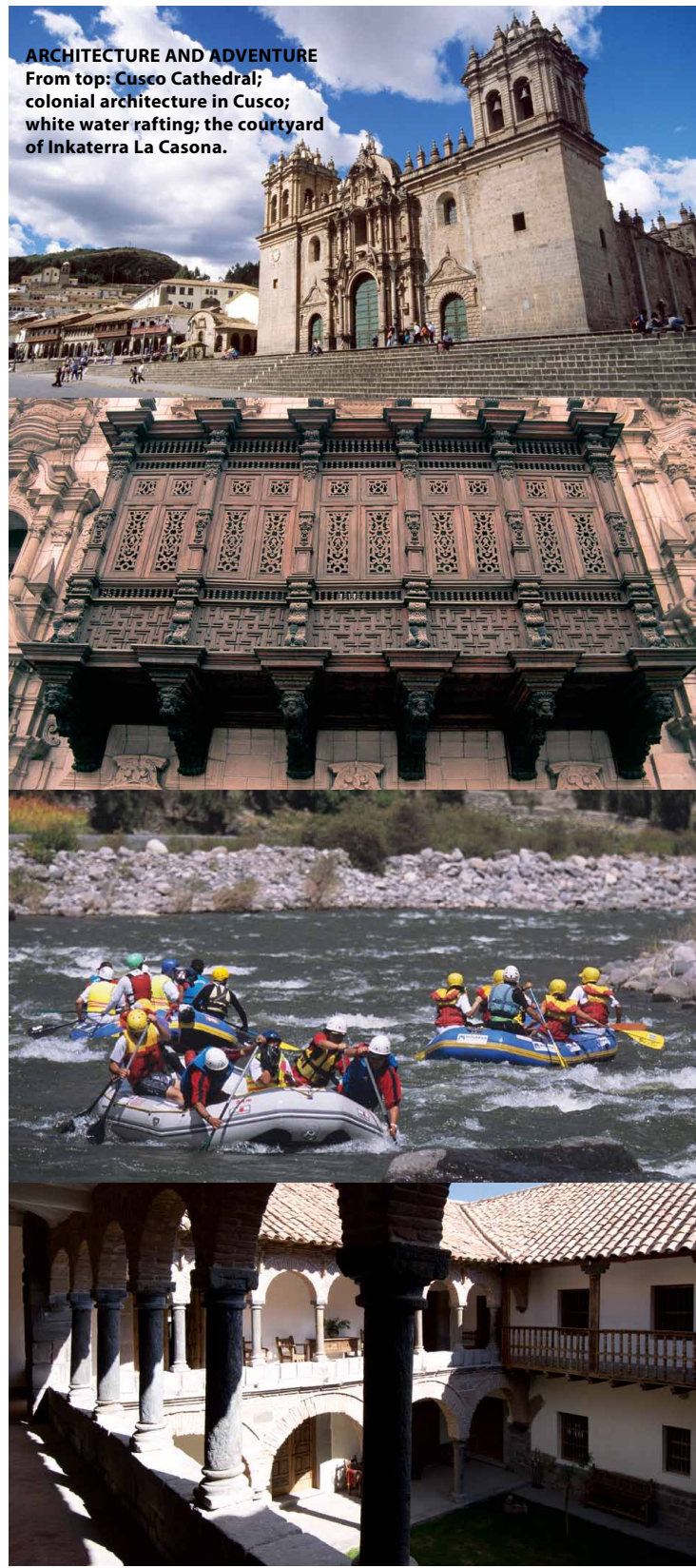
Getting Around

Peru is a big country (the third largest in South America in fact) and flying is easily the best way to get around most of it. The drive from Lima to Cusco is close to 24 hours and crosses some hair-raisingly high mountain passes, while the flight is just over an hour. And landing at Cusco airport is an experience not to be missed – the plane makes a last minute dive over the Andes and circles the small valley before coming to a fairly abrupt stop. Legend has it that sometimes the pilots overshoot and have to go back up and do it again.

If you have time on your side it's worth taking the luxury Andean Explorer train from Cusco south to Puno on the shore of Lake Titicaca. The tracks climb through the Andes to reach La Raya, 4,335 metres above sea level, before the landscape changes to gentle plains with grazing Andean vicuña (alpaca-like animals raised for their wool) and alpaca. The train is styled like a 1920s Pullman and there's an open-air observation car for taking photos during the eight-to-ten-hour journey. You can also travel from Cusco to Machu Picchu (well, to Aguas Calientes anyway and then drive the last stretch) onboard the luxurious Hiram Bingham train operated by Orient-Express. The journey takes around three and a half hours and you'll arrive at Machu Picchu refreshed from a three-course brunch, freshly squeezed orange juice and sparkling wine.

THE WORLD'S LATEST LUXURY HOTSPOT
Clockwise: Peru has thousands of kilometres of waterways; pre-Hispanic and Spanish traditions merge in Peruvian folk art; traditional reed boats are still used on Lake Titicaca; majestic Andean views; Peruvian women hand weave brightly coloured fabrics; local llamas avoiding the glare.





ARCHITECTURE AND ADVENTURE
From top: Cusco Cathedral;
colonial architecture in Cusco;
white water rafting; the courtyard
of Inkaterra La Casona.

2. WHY YOU'LL FEEL SAFE THERE

In 1988 Peru received a record 360,000 tourists and US\$300 million in tourist earnings. But the rise of terrorist groups Sendero Luminoso (the Shining Path) and Tupac Amaru (MRTA) saw tourist numbers fall 70 per cent by 1991. In 1992 the leader of the Shining Path, Abimael Guzman, was captured and the movement quickly lost momentum. As the threat of terrorism abated tourists began to return with more than 400,000 visitors entering the country in 1994.

The industry has never looked back. Tourism in Peru has been growing rapidly, recently overtaking fishing to become the second largest industry in the country (mining is still out in front). It's the fastest growing industry in the country and is outpacing all other countries in South America at a rate of 25 per cent a year. The tourism sector grew four per cent in 2010 despite the worldwide downturn. Peru's new President, Ollanta Humala, is serious about encouraging tourism and has formed the country's first Ministry of Tourism. The first order of business for the new ministry is to implement the Tourism Security Assistance Network that will enable the national Tourist Police to provide greater protection and assistance to travellers.

3. YOUR CHOICE FROM THE FINEST HOTELS

While tourists can stay at the usual array of five-star establishments in Peru (including the particularly nice Westin Lima which opened in May 2011), the country has a number of locally owned independent hotel groups operating luxury properties like Aranwa, Inkaterra, Casa Andina and Libertador. These groups are offering a credible luxury alternative to the multinationals with a focus on quality, service, cultural experience, history, conservation and sustainability.

Over the past five years these independent groups have opened unique properties across the country, with much of the development centred on Cusco and the surrounding Sacred Valley where at least 12 properties have opened.

Spanish colonial buildings have been converted into stunning small hotels, like the Aranwa Cusco Boutique Hotel, which opened in 2010. This 16th century mansion is now a beautifully refurbished 43-room hotel in the centre of Cusco. The rooms are all colonial charm, but with the added bonus of modern technology – an intelligent oxygen system filters the air in the hotel so that you won't be affected by the altitude. My room had a huge spa bath in the marble bathroom that I gratefully fell into after a long, hot day of walking around Machu Picchu. The Aranwa chain also operates a hotel in the Sacred Valley in a 17th century hacienda, which opened in 2008.

Cusco is also home to Peru's only Relais & Châteaux property, the Inkaterra La Casona. Opened in 2008 the 11-suite hotel is in a restored colonial manor

Tourism in Peru has been growing rapidly, recently overtaking fishing to become the second largest industry in the country.

COLONIAL CHIC AND ANCIENT ART
Clockwise: the Hotel Monasterio in Cusco is a restored Baroque monastery; carved figures at Chan Chan; period features at Inkaterra La Casona.



house, possibly the first colonial building in Cusco, built over an Inca complex. The property gives the impression of a private residence and entry is through an unmarked door off one of Cusco's many cobbled plazas. It isn't hard to imagine conquistadors strolling through the sun drenched internal courtyard or pulling off their boots in front of the bedroom fireplace at night.

The sprawling Tambo del Inka hotel opened in Urubamba in the Sacred Valley in mid-2010. The lobby is banked by floor to ceiling windows with exposed wooden beams, large squishy lounges and an open fireplace giving it the feel of an expansive ski chalet. The rooms are bright and airy with high ceilings, an enormous bathroom and a separate dressing room where I happily upended my suitcase. The hotel even has its own private train station where you can board one of the luxury trains to Machu Picchu if you aren't the type to trek.

Peru's grandest old hotel, the Country Club Lima, was built in the 1920s and completely remodelled in 2008. The rooms are large and filled with genuine antiques and artwork, and the various ballrooms are the place for Lima society weddings on the weekend. We were there on a Saturday night and saw a number of brides waiting their turn for photographs on the entrance stairway, tapping their high-heeled feet and muttering impatiently in Spanish. Lima's first five-star hotel, the Miraflores Cesar, was reinvented in 2008 as the Casa Andina Private Collection Miraflores and also houses an impressive art and antique collection. The original hotel pianist from the 1970s, Arturo del Pozo, even comes back to play on the restored grand piano in the lobby every night.

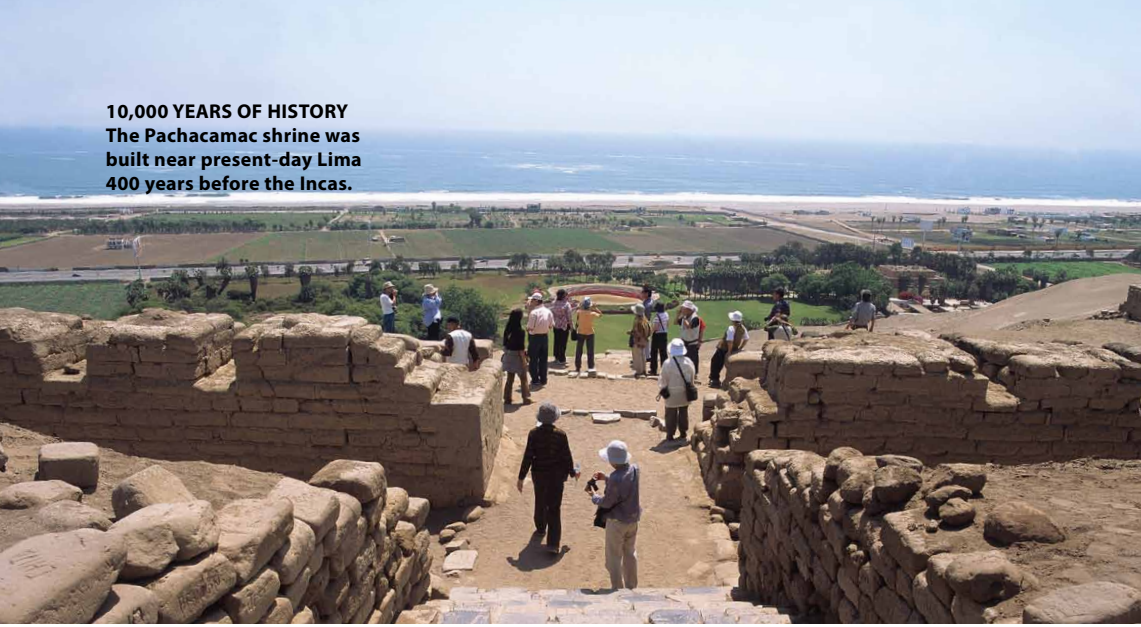
The luxury hotel market in Peru is continuously expanding and there are a number of new properties set to open in 2012, including the Hotel Barranco, a resorted 1914 belle époque mansion in the trendy, bohemian Barranco district of Lima. The Orient-Express group, which operates five hotels throughout Peru, is opening the Palacio Nazarenas in Cusco, an all-suite property in a former palace and convent near the hip neighbourhood of San Blas. The group's Hotel Monasterio, a restored Baroque monastery in Cusco, is also due to be expanded in 2012. Celebrity chef Gaston Acurio is set to open a luxury boutique hotel in Casa Moreyra, a colonial hacienda in Lima. Called the Hotel Nativa it will be the first of a range of hotels that Acurio intends to open across Latin America. JW Marriott will be opening its third Peruvian property in Cusco, joining Lima and Quito. The US\$40 million property will have a customised design built around a colonial church and Inca artefacts found on the site.

Looking further forward the Aranwa Colca Hotel, a riverside resort spa in the Colca Valley near Arequipa in southern Peru, is scheduled to open in April 2013 and the Aranwa Paracas Resort on Peru's central coast will open in late 2013. The Casa Andina group is planning to open four new luxury hotels in northern Peru over the next four years

4. WHERE TO FIND EXCITING CUISINE

Peru is currently working hard to establish itself as a gourmand's destination and Peruvian cuisine is garnering serious attention both internally and internationally.

10,000 YEARS OF HISTORY
The Pachacamac shrine was built near present-day Lima 400 years before the Incas.



I had a vague notion that Peruvian food would be something like Mexican, based, I can only assume, on the fact that Mexico is as far south from the United States as I had ever been. I was wrong, and the only place I saw a taco in Peru was in the tourist transit hub of Aguas Calientes. The Peruvians are sitting on some of the finest cuisine in South America, if not the world. The national dish, cebiche (or sometimes ceviche), is a mix of diced raw fish, lemon juice, coriander, chili and onions. I fell instantly in love and ate it every chance I could. Dishes are light and fresh, using seafood, brightly coloured tropical fruits, spices and potatoes. Lots of potatoes. Peru grows 2,800 varieties of potato, and I ate them all. An interesting quirk of Peruvian food is that the potato is considered a vegetable akin to carrots or spinach rather than a carbohydrate accompaniment, so you will often find yourself presented with a meal containing both potatoes and rice. Undeniably delicious, but not great for the holiday waistline.

In 2010 Astrid y Gastón restaurant, a Lima institution, was one of only five new entries in the prestigious San Pellegrino World's 50 Best Restaurants list, coming in at number 42. The owner and chef, Gastón Acurio, is a national celebrity and flew the flag for Peruvian cuisine at last year's Sydney International Food Festival. Acurio is a champion of traditional Peruvian food, serving classics with a modern twist. I ate at his restaurant on my first night in Peru and the meal was a revelation – who knew Peking *cuy* (guinea pig) pancakes could be even more delicious than their duck counterparts? Acurio operates a number of restaurants around Peru (including the Café del Museo at the Museo Larco, where I ate another, equally fantastic meal), throughout South America and as far off as New York and Madrid. You heard it here first – Peruvian food is the next big thing.

5. UNFORGETTABLE EXPERIENCES

You can't talk about Peruvian experiences without mentioning Machu Picchu and the Inca Trail. It is Peru's most famous attraction and, arguably, its biggest tourist drawcard. But there is much more to Peru than this one mountaintop citadel.

I was looked after by Lima Tours, a boutique luxury tour company that specialises in organising bespoke travel around the country. They organised some incredible experiences, including the personal highlight of my trip – a private lunch at Casa de Aliaga, the oldest family home in Lima. There are few things more sublime than Sunday lunch in a beautifully preserved 16th century mansion with white gloved waiters following you around bearing trays of pâté and pisco sours. For the more adventurous Lima Tours can arrange treks across the Cordillera Blanca, the highest tropical mountain range in the world, rock climbing in the Andes or canoeing and white water rafting along some of Peru's thousands of kilometres of waterways. Many of the guides are trained in special areas, so you can go bird watching in the Amazon with a biologist, visit remote villages on Lake Titicaca with an anthropologist or explore ancient Inca sites with an archaeologist.

But what I most enjoyed about Peru were all the little experiences I had along the way. I rode a donkey through a small village much to the amusement of the locals who, I'm confident, stand at their doors at the same time everyday to see the gringos pass by. I played blackjack in a glitzy casino and lost all of my *soles*. I ate vibrantly coloured fruits I couldn't identify or pronounce at an early morning market. I danced the night away in a club surrounded by gorgeous Limeños. Because that's what I found so charming about Peru – every day brought a new experience and every one of them left me with a smile on my face.

Getting there

LAN flies from Sydney to Lima daily via Santiago, Chile with a quick stop in Auckland. Return economy class fares start from A\$2,575 and business class from A\$8,775. lan.com

Where to stay

Lima

The Westin Lima Hotel

westinlima.com.pe

Rates: US\$311-597 (about A\$305-586) per night.

Country Club Hotel Lima

hotelcountry.com

Rates: US\$209-599 (about A\$205-588) per night.

Casa Andina Private Collection

Miraflores

casa-andina.com

Rates: US\$179-617 (about A\$176-605) per night.

Cusco

Aranwa Cusco Boutique Hotel

aranwahotels.com

Rates: from US\$298 (about A\$292) per night.

La Casona Cusco Hotel

inkaterra.com

Rates: Plaza Suites from US\$895 (about A\$878) per night.

Hotel Monasterio

monasteriohotel.com

Rates: US\$425-681 (about A\$417-668) per night.

Sacred Valley

Aranwa Sacred Valley Hotel &

Wellness

aranwahotels.com

Rates: US\$180-650 (about A\$177-638) per night.

Tambo del Inka Resort & Spa

libertador.com.pe

Rates: US\$262-800 (about A\$257-784) per night.

For more information about Lima Tours visit limatours.com.pe
Find more information about travelling in Peru at peru.travel/en/