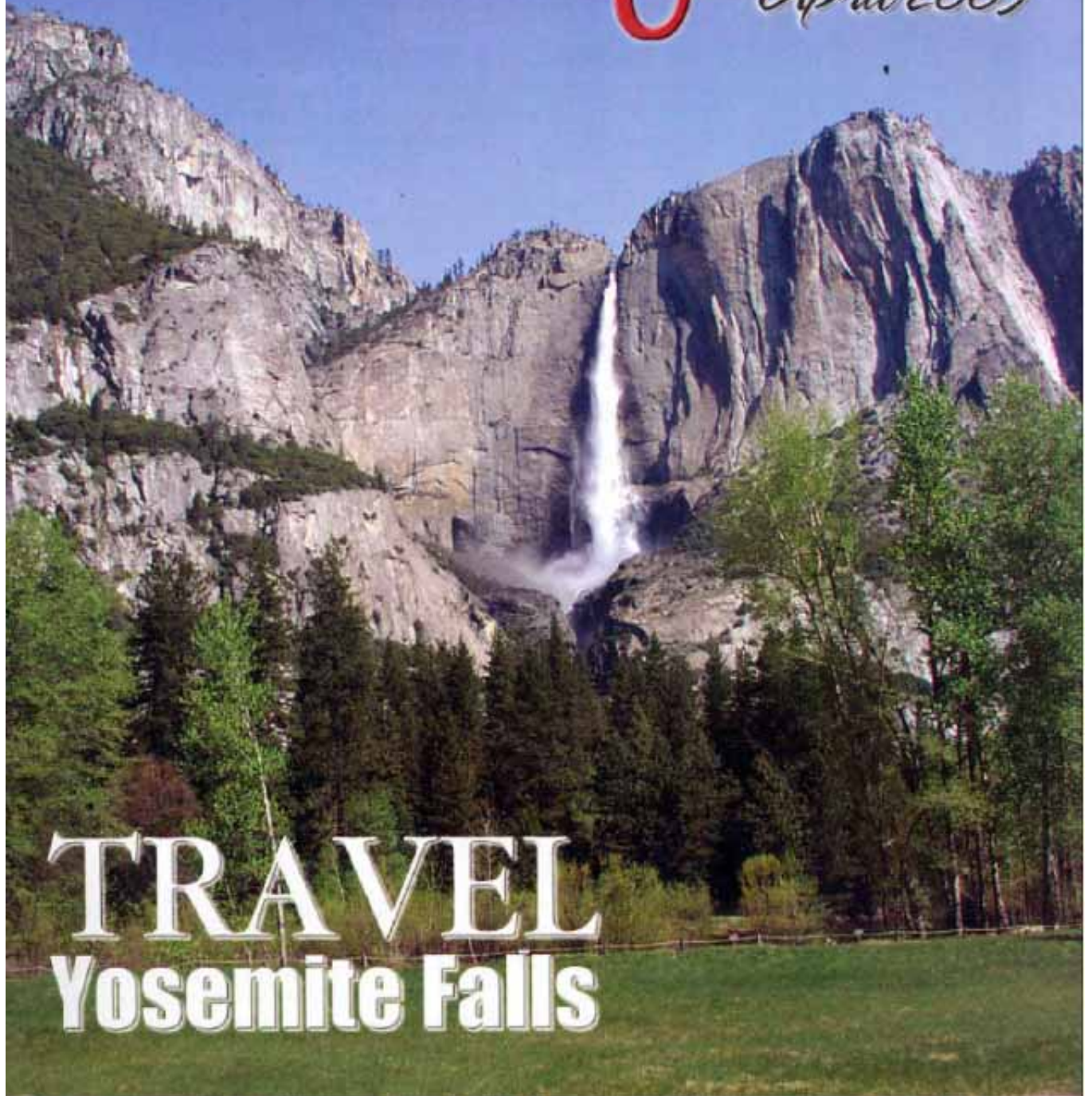


LIFE'S SECOND HALF ON THE CENTRAL COAST

# PLUS magazine

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**TRAVEL**  
**Yosemite Falls**

# Inca-redible Peru

by Sue Thomas

The sun begins to rise over a sea of terra cotta tiled roofs that blanket the sloping hills of Cusco. At this early hour, the lobby of the elegant Hotel Libertador is filled with small clusters of guests.

Some are dressed in well-worn cargo pants, sturdy hiking boots, and stand beside waterproof backpacks the size of young children. They wait to begin an arduous four day trek through some of Peru's most uninviting terrain. Carrying provisions and makeshift shelters, their



*Machu Picchu ruins*

plan is to follow the mountainous trail blazed by the mysterious Inca.

Other guests, ourselves included, wear cashmere soft alpaca sweaters in a rainbow of colors. We chat excitedly while sipping the local coca tea, said to help prevent the negative effects of Cusco's high elevation.

gance. We are served champagne while a local historian points out sites of interest, and teaches us words in Quecha – the ancient language of the Inca.

The train wends its way over level farmland to dramatic, boulder-strewn gorges. Glancing across the river valley, we spot weary hikers trudging along on day two of their Inca Trail adventure. At the same time, we are served a dramatic three-course luncheon featuring Peruvian appetizers and a veal entrée. Dessert is a feather light mousse.

Still later, we arrive in the bustling village of Aguas Calientes. Nestled beside the Urubamba River, the city is nearly hidden in the shadowy cloud forest at the base of Machu Picchu.

Our home for the next several days is the unique Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel. Owned by Inkaterra, the property flawlessly melds guest accommodations with the unique environment. It's an eco-travelers paradise.

The Pueblo offers spacious rooms with fireplaces to take the chill off the cool evenings. These are embraced by the lushly tropical cloud forest, which boasts many varieties of rare orchids. Flashes of brilliant color are everywhere as hummingbirds flit from bloom to bloom.

From the French doors of my room, I simply step out onto the patio to find myself enveloped in a dense, jungle-like cocoon. A maze of paths trail through orchid fields, groves of towering ferns, and beside a sacred boulder adorned with petroglyphs. My senses are on high alert, and the air is ripe with the loamy scent of fallen leaves and the thundering sound of the Urubamba River.

Soon we'll leave to board PeruRail's lavishly appointed train, the Hiram Bingham.

Though the two experiences couldn't be more different, our final destination is the same. Cusco is the jumping off point for all travelers hoping to view one of the most enigmatic sites in the world – the ruins of Machu Picchu.

Aboard, the Hiram Bingham, the décor is one of Old World ele-



*City of Cusco*

Meals are an event. Each features an array of local delicacies, as well as fruit, herbs, and vegetables from the organic gardens on site.

In the morning, we gorge ourselves on the buffet breakfast. Well fed, we make our way to the ruins of Machu Picchu aboard a local bus. It cautiously worms its way along a road highlighted by dozens of hairpin turns, each edged by a steep drop off.

Our bus deposits us at a base camp and we begin a moderate hike up a series of stone staircases. Though the climb is dramatic, it's the elevation that causes, old and young alike, to pause frequently for breath. Finally, we reach one of the highest points, the guard tower. We turn and take stock of our surroundings.

Through the morning mist I can just make out the Urubamba River, flowing ribbon-like, several thousand feet below. The rugged terrain appears well suited to the surefooted llama and little else.

Vegetation, like an invading army, waits patiently in the wings ready to overrun the area if left untended. Yet, at 10,000 feet elevation, this isolated, and seemingly inhospitable mountain saddle is where the ancient Inca chose to build this enigmatic complex of buildings.

Though I'd seen countless pictures and documentaries on Machu Picchu, they can't begin to compare to the real thing.

This sprawling, pre-Columbian city of houses, temples, towers, and walls, blanket the peak. Its terraces seem to drip down the mountainsides like a magma flow.

Massive, fifty-ton stones appear to sprout from the ground, supporting a mosaic of walls and altars. Each granite block is individually carved into a masterpiece of harmonious perfection that would be nearly impossible to duplicate today. The fit is so precise, the use of mortar was unnecessary.

An intricate system of narrow channels is carved throughout the complex. Even now, water continues to flow along these courses as it has for the past 500 years.

Echo chambers are built into several temples. Their original purpose has been lost to time, but when we stand before them and hum, the sound is magnified, carried through the complex, and echoes into the valley. The result is awe-inspiring.

Also filling the air are the cheers of those completing their challenging four-day trek along the Inca Trail. They look tired and a bit less than clean, but their expressions, once seeing Machu Picchu, are exultant.

Though the sprawling ruins are visually impressive, the site remains shrouded in mystery. Theories abound about its purpose. They range from a religious retreat, to a fortress, a royal estate, an astronomical observatory, and even a landing site for extraterrestrials.

Even more compelling is the mystery of the people who occupied the city. Was Machu Picchu abandoned? Did the inhabitants die of disease carried by outsiders, or was the city one of the many invaded by



*Machu Picchu ruins*

the conquistadors?

The day flies as we trek through the ruins, propose reasonable and totally outlandish theories for the complex, and bask in its aura of mystery. We finally decide that perhaps the riddle of Machu Picchu is best left unsolved.

If you go:

Let Inkaterra plan your next Peruvian adventure. They can coordinate tours that combine the excitement of the Amazon River along with the mystery of a trip to Machu Picchu. Visit their website at [www.inkaterra.com](http://www.inkaterra.com), or give them a call at 1-800-442-5042.

*Sue Thomas remembers her inca-redible time in Peru from her home in Arroyo Grande, CA.*