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# PICCHU PERFECT

Peru is moving on from backpacking days of old and becoming something of a luxury hotspot, with travellers able to experience its vast terrain and stunning sights in comfort. *Abigail Cattell* explores some of its highlights

## Darkest Peru

has been capturing the imaginations of modern travellers ever since Paddington Bear stepped off the train more than 50 years ago. More recently, soldier-turned-TV star Bruce Parry's jungle adventures in *Amazon* have raised the country's profile.

Top of most travellers' wish list is Machu Picchu, the astonishing mountain-top Inca city where up to 2,500 tourists flock on a daily basis. Peru welcomed more than two million visitors in 2008 and the country has always had something of a reputation as a backpacker hotspot. More recently however, it has increasingly been staking a place on the luxury map.

Tourism commission PromPeru's Elisabeth Hakim is its coordinator for North America and UK. She says: "We've seen considerable growth in the high-end market with a rise in new boutique and luxury properties in areas such as Cusco and the Sacred Valley."

## Eco-exotic

One such company is eco-luxury brand Inkaterra, co-founded by Peruvian Jose Koehlin in 1975. Inkaterra has three hotels across the country from the Peruvian Amazon to ancient Cusco. Of course, everyone wants to be seen as eco-friendly these days, but for Inkaterra, it's always been a dedicated ethos.

"Inkaterra demonstrates the true concept of eco-tourism: ecological



research funded by tourism, creating jobs and conserving the natural bio-diversity. And we're the first carbon neutral organisation in Peru," says Koechlin.

When Inkaterra built the Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel, they also replanted the 36 acres of land with endemic plants, returning it to cloud forest and in the process creating the world's largest orchidarium and a home for 111 species of butterfly and 18 types of hummingbirds.

An organic vegetable garden project is underway at Machu Picchu Pueblo, and in line with Inkaterra's philosophy to serve local produce prepared by locals living close by, the goal is to serve 100% organic produce at the Machu Picchu and La Casona properties. A bear rescue project at Inkaterra Machu Picchu gives guests the opportunity to "adopt a bear" as part of the donation programme.

## Resilient sales

It seems the current economic climate hasn't dampened Peru's popularity, with people perhaps even more keen for those experiential trips that will create long-lasting memories. "Peru's popularity is relatively unaffected by the UK gloom and Inca Trail permits are just as sold out as they were last year, which is in no small part due to the country's people and natural attractions," says Edward Paine, chairman of the Latin American Travel Association.

We weren't walking the Inca Trail to

Machu Picchu: instead, like most visitors, we went the easy way, on a quaint blue train that chugged from Ollantaytambo to the sprawling town of Aguas Calientes.

The journey took us through a deep gorge beside the roaring Urubamba river, taking in vistas of dramatic cliffs softened by carpets of brightly coloured flowers. One minute we were in a dusty market in uninspiring Aguas Calientes, the next we had wandered from the Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel off into the cloud forest, an oasis of ferns and subtropical foliage.

This 87-room hotel is designed to reflect a local village and guestrooms are large and rustically decorated, with chunky wooden furniture and colourful blankets contrasting with sleek glass and marble bathrooms. The lodge has two restaurants, serving an excellent mix of local and international food.

The existence of Machu Picchu wasn't discovered until American historian Hiram Bingham virtually stumbled upon it with a local guide in 1911. These days, suggest to clients they need to get there by 6.30am to see more of the sunrise and less of the crowds. After our early start and a short uphill walk, we were standing in front of the incredible vista of this iconic sight engulfed by mountain peaks as a condor soared above our heads. The sun floods the scene's 200-plus stone buildings, neatly jigsawed together by the talented Incas.

## Dizzy heights

Next stop is Cusco, once the heart of the Incan Empire. Driving into its fabulous central square, Plaza de Armas, was literally breathtaking. At 3,326 metres it's more than twice as high as Ben Nevis, Britain's highest mountain. Altitude sickness can occur anywhere above 2,400m, with breathlessness, headaches and sickness. Luckily we'd adjusted gradually during the journey through the Sacred Valley ("only" 2,715m).

In Cusco we stayed at Inkaterra's newest property, La Casona, which has just 11 suites and started life as a 16th-century

home for a Spanish conquistador. All graceful arched columns swooping around a pretty central courtyard, the interior design has been sensitively carried out by Jose Koechlin's wife, who has added honey-coloured stone walls, intricate woven rugs and priceless Incan artefacts.

Cobbled Cusco is home to the arty San Blas barrio (district) where galleries and quirky bars jostle for attention. If clients ask for restaurant recommendations, direct them to the smart Tuscan hangout Ciccilina, for fusion dishes such as osso buco (braised veal shanks) in beer and scallops in soy sauce. Nearby architectural treasures on the must-see list include the puma-shaped Saqsaywaman fortress and Andahuaylilla's 17th-century church, sometimes called the Andean Sistine Chapel for its ornate interior.

## Hotel du Lac

From Cusco we journeyed onwards and upwards to the Titilaka hotel, perched on the side of Lake Titicaca, the world's highest navigable lake. Getting there was half the fun; a bumpy drive along a dirt track and a boat ride with guide Julius Caesar, who was taking us to meet his Uros family. The Uros live on floating islands made from weaving tons of reeds together, eating fish and reeds as their staple diet.

While it was fascinating to find out about the Uros culture, I was relieved to reach luxurious lake-front Titilaka and to discover we were dining on alpaca steak and a delicious three-milk pudding, rather than reeds and fish.

Peru is a wondrous place of discovery and adventure and Last Frontiers, which meticulously organised our tour, says the country has wide appeal, from families looking for rafting and mountain biking to couples and honeymooners enchanted by beautiful historic hotels, markets and stunning scenery. Next time your clients say they want the adventure of a lifetime, you can put your faith in recommending Peru. And they don't have to rough it like Bruce Parry either. ■



Main picture:  
Sacred Valley  
Clockwise from top:  
Inkaterra Machu Picchu  
Pueblo Hotel; patio suite  
at La Casona; Titilaka  
Hotel on Lake Titicaca

## HOW TO BOOK IT

A 10-day itinerary in Peru costs from £3,895 per person (valid for a departure until June 16, 2010) with Last Frontiers. The trip includes staying one night in Lima; two at Villas Urubamba (part of Andean Experience); two at Inkaterra's Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel; two at Inkaterra's La Casona in Cusco; and two nights at Titilaka (part of Andean Experience). Price includes private transfers, most meals, flights with LAN from Heathrow via Madrid and internal flights with LAN. Tel: 01296 653000, lastfrontiers.com  
Inkaterra: inkaterra.com  
Andean Experiences: andean-experience.com