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Travel



The things



I'll do for gold



Waldemar Januszczak indulges his obsession with buried treasure on a swashbuckling adventure through the jungles and mountains of Peru

could lie to you and tell you that what lured me back to Peru was the amazing biodiversity of the place, or the taste of stuan guinea pig, or the baroque churches of Cuzco, or -- with winter coming in -- the need for a new poncho. And, of course, there are all these fantastic attractions, and they certainly played a part. But what really brought me back -- the extra-large attraction that I simply could not expect from my dreams -- was the gold.

See, I lead a double life. By day, I'm a jobbing journalist plying my trade for *The Sunday Times*. But at night, in the seclusion of my own bed and my own thoughts, I'm a gold fiend. I don't mean that I steal the stuff, or spend everything I have on it, or sit on huge mountains of it at home. I don't. But I am weirdly keen on it. Something about this mad metal that the Incas used to call "the sweat of the sun" yanks my ball and brings me to life. This illness, by the way, is contagious. My wife has it too. The last time I was in Peru, I bought back a gold necklace featuring the head of a pre-Columbian god with green eyes, and in three years that she has owned it, I do not recall seeing her without it.

The excellent thing about going to Peru so my another necklace for the woman you love is that you can do it at the airport on the way out, and the rest of the journey can be happily devoted to sampling Peru's different joys. It's a win-win.



vacation, Peru is so biologically diverse because, geologically speaking, it is three distinct terrains. The coast is a desert. Nazca, where the ground is covered by the famous Nazca Lines, which Inca son Darius had inscribed were hanging strips for visiting aliens, is also the home of the world's largest sand dunes, and gets only 5mm of rain a year. Then come the Andes, the most exciting mountains outside Asia. But, having thrust you into the clouds, blow me if Peru doesn't then dump you back down again onto a particularly sweaty jungle, the Amazon basin, which occupies most of the country, and which thrives richly with biodiversity.

It's easy to sample these three natural habitats on a single visit. For I know from previous experience that once I get to Nazca, I get so caught up in the mystery of the Nazca Lines

that I'm loath to budge, so this time I decided to avoid the desert entirely and confine myself to the mountains and the jungle. From Lima, we flew to Puerto Maldonado, named after one of the original Spanish conquistadors held here by the natives of El Dorado: the city of gold. Positioned handily at the confluence of two large Amazonian tributaries, Puerto Maldonado's chief task these days is to service the gold-diggers who gather here to dredge the congealed waters for the sweet of the sun.

We prepared ourselves in the welcome party sent out by our jungle lodge -- the Ikuqueria Reserva Amazonica -- and were taken upriver on a motorised canoe along an archetypal stretch of Amazonian basin, with thick jungle drooping to the water's edges and scarlet macaws swooshing overhead. On the way, we passed a floating shantytown of bulky black boats covered in tarps and moored in backflats, inside which I caught glimpses of shirtless working men and their glutinous women hanging out the laundry. Who are they? I asked the girl from the lodge. "Gold-diggers," she replied with disdain. "They are not friendly."

The lodge was built in airy native style, with thatched roofs and big-battering mesh windows. Dinner was taken communally in the dramatic central "cafetal". First yuca, raw fish and, for dessert, every fruit on earth. That night they took us back out on the boxes for a cayman-spotting tour. Everywhere the guys shove their umbrellas, the twin stars of a crumpled's eyes seemed in those back. So my

plan -- to swim out to the gold-diggers and offer them some kind of deal -- was obviously out.

The lodge has various expeditions to choose from. We chose wisely, plumping for the trip to Lake Sandoval, which I had read was one of the best places on earth to see the rare giant river otter. A boat takes you halfway, and you then wade for two miles into the jungle, a journey made short by what you see: just as we get to the lake, what should be perfectly into the open for us but a pair of huge blue-and-gold macaws!

Sandoval is unusually beautiful, and seems to pop up from nowhere, its black waters hidden behind an impenetrable strip of surrounding palms. As soon as we were in the canoe, a commotion broke out in the water ahead. Something huge rolled over. Something big started. Up near the bank, a gang of giant river otters were having their lunch. They are roughly the size of a St Bernard, and, once one of these monsters has the poor fish in its grasp, it turns onto its back and just floats there, like a rich Californian, playing with the fish on its tummy, before biting it in half with a terrifying crunch.

The lodge was so relaxing that I even liked the canopy tent and surrounded by towering trees even hanging bridges that would have tested the nerves of Indians here. At night, though, I lay motionless, hearing in the pitch, plus, plus of the gold-diggers on their boats, keeping up their 20-hour shifts, searching, searching, and I dream my conquistador dreams.

Filled up good and proper on such a tough experience, it was time to risk it opposite: to go up to the clouds, up into the realm of the gods, up to Machu Picchu. For some reason, I had never previously felt much of a need to see it. Friends had complained about the crowds



that converge there. And, once you have seen one Inca wall, you have seen them all, haven't you? But they recently made Machu Picchu one of the New Seven Wonders of the World. Since I had visited the other six, it seemed right to complete the set.

We broke the journey at Ollantayambo, which has some dramatic Inca ruins of its own, and where we stayed at another delightful Inkatersa hotel, the Villa Soria. A local woman called Bertha came and cooked our dinner for us. Four types of potato. Grilled chicken. Cornmeal cake. Yum, yum. The next morning, we caught the Machu Picchu train, and gurned happily out of the windows at the gangs of gaping foreign tourists who had chosen to traipse there instead, along the dreaded Inca Trail.

Machu Picchu turned out to be one of those precious destinations that are even better than you think they will be. Ringed by impossibly lofty mountains, it's a breathtaking place, literally and metaphorically. I knew about the walls, the impossible jagons of perfect Inca masonry. But I wasn't prepared for the brilliant Stone Age anatomy, or the mad story lines of the temples.

At the Temple of the Condor, nature created the bird god's wings with two spectacular nicks arranged

in a V, but the Incas themselves came up with his body, carved from a bird-shaped boulder and incised with twin grooves down which the sacrificial blood could run. I was happily envisaging all this in Technicolor when something fat and fluffy stroled out of a crevice and looked at me, hungrily. It was a chinchilla.

AS YOU CAN perhaps sense from the delirium entering my tone, I was now careering around Peru half crazy with delight. The Orient-Express organisation runs a train from Machu Picchu to Cuzco that leaves the mountain at 6 o'clock in the evening, and that seems to detour you through the middle of an Agatha Christie story. Velvet seats. Elegant waiters. Dangerous cocktails. It's called the Hiram Bingham train, after the famous American adventurer who rediscovered the ruins, and if your pockets are

deep enough, you simply must get on it. In the last carriage, a Peruvian band plays a roun before dinner, and they do all the old favourites — Guarananitas, Oh! Oh!, and my personal speciality, La Bambu, as the first chords of which I am afraid I leapt to my feet and showed them all how it should be sung.

Back in Lima, there was time before the flight home to visit the Gold Museum. The most striking exhibit was a human skull that had had a square hole cut out of it during a ritualistic pre-Columbian trepanning, which was then patched with pure gold. Some lucky local actually walked about the pre-Inca world with that in their head. On an adjacent wall was a row of gold nets, the ornate ceremonial knives used to cut the skull. The largest of them had a decorated handle tipped with the familiar features of a god with green eyes. I looked at my wife's beloved necklace. It was definitely the same face. So, all these years, she had been carrying around an implement for cutting open human brains. At that fine moment of recognition, I loved it and her even more.

■ *Waldemar Januszczak travelled as a guest of The Ultimate Travel Company*

Travel details: the South American specialist The Ultimate Travel Company (020 7386 4646 www.theultimatetravelcompany.co.uk) can arrange tailor-made journeys across Peru. Eleven days, beginning in Lima and taking in Inkatersa's Reserva Amanayes, the Lindambo Valley, Machu Picchu and the Orient-Express Monasterio hotel, in Cuzco, start at £2,579pp, including international and domestic flights, private transfers, private guided sightseeing and most meals. Other operators include Last Frontiers (01296 653000, www.lastfrontiers.com), Audley Travel (01993 838000, www.audleytravel.com) and Trips Worldwide (0117 311 4400, www.tripsworldwide.co.uk).

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