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# Spas of the Sacred Valley

Smart suitcases are replacing backpacks in the remote valley below Machu Picchu. By Ian Belcher

I'm nervous. I can't move. Painted in gloopy Andean mud and mummified in a plastic shroud, I appear to have become a ritualistic offering. Given my location – halfway down Peru's Sacred Valley where the Incas weren't averse to the occasional human sacrifice – I feel a tad vulnerable.

But the gods will have to wait. After 20 minutes of light basting at gas-mark five, Talia, the high priestess of my chic contemporary spa, shows mercy. I'm unwrapped for a muscular massage using Peruvian mint, coca leaf and horse tail. There isn't a ceremonial dagger in sight.

At Rio Sagrado, which opened last year, the luxury travel company Orient Express is harnessing local traditions, produce and staff to create a fresh take on upmarket accommodation. At a point where the valley widens and the Urubamba River curls languorously beneath sheer ochre cliffs, the hotel's 11 rooms, 10 suites and two villas are spread out through gardens of Andean fuchsias, amaryllis and broom.

Mixing the traditional (eucalyptus beams, terracotta pantiles) with the modern (unfussy decor, glass-sided bathrooms), it offers widescreen views of the river and star-drenched night sky. A melodic tinkle of water is a reminder that centuries-old Inca irrigation channels still deliver snowmelt to the gardens from surrounding glaciers. After dark, strategically placed spotlights team up with the moon's rays, alchemising

A melodic tinkle of water is a reminder that Inca irrigation channels still deliver snowmelt from surrounding glaciers



Retreat From top: the spa at Rio Sagrado; a traditional Peruvian costume

the Urubamba into a ribbon of silver.

The opening puts Orient Express at the forefront of a luxury boom in the heart of the valley that chases the muscular river from Pisac towards Machu Picchu. Within a 20-minute drive, its neighbours include Starwood's Tambo del Inka, opened last May, and Aranwa, recently expanded to embrace South America's largest spa complex.

But that's just the start. Developers are stacked like aircraft above Heathrow. Chilean wilderness operator, Explora, along with Peruvian ecotourism pioneers, Inkater, are set to break ground in the area soon, while Aman Resorts, purveyor of pared-back elegance, is rumoured to have earmarked a site at nearby Huayocari (though it won't officially comment).

The increasing popularity of the central Sacred Valley is partly down to altitude. It's relatively easy on the body for anyone arriving in the Peruvian Highlands – and the cultural attractions of higher, more physically taxing Cusco can be scheduled for later in a trip. "At 2,700m we're a lot lower than the city – you're less likely to get sick," explains Rio Sagrado general manager Rodrigo Ofner.

"It's also more convenient for nearby Inca sites. Guests spend a couple of days acclimatising with visits to Ollantaytambo, Maras and Moray. If they're staying in Cusco, they have to travel out to the valley and then return at the end of the day."

His hotel's claim to be a natural base for the onward journey to Machu Picchu has strengthened with the opening of its new railway stop directly outside. One of



PeruRail's Vistadome trains now runs from Urubamba to the mountain-top citadel, using a line mothballed for five years.

Despite its geographical advantages, Rio Sagrado experienced one of the most traumatic births in hotel history. Just weeks after Orient Express assumed control in January 2010 – it was launched by different owners 13 months before – the area was hit by a catastrophic deluge. The Urubamba's steady flow mutated into a ravenous surge, obliterating the gardens and closing the hotel for two weeks.

Business, however, was floored for a further two months. Floods down the valley washed away sections of railway, leaving about 2,000 tourists stranded. Sanctuary Lodge – the Orient Express hotel at Machu Picchu – became a crisis headquarters with floors covered in mattresses for visitors awaiting helicopter evacuation. The rail route, along with a viable flow of tourists, wasn't restored until April.

Now Rio Sagrado has hit its stride – and is aiming for close integration with the surrounding community. Locals make up 94 per cent of the staff and the hotel sponsors handicrafts and agricultural workshops, while sourcing produce from the area's farmers. Regional flavours haunt the menu at its El Huerto Restaurant: mountain trout, lamb and llama, served with valley crops from fava beans, high-altitude potatoes and sun-dried corn to lemon-scented quinoa mousse.

Even the striking glass-fronted spa, where a waterfall cascades off the raised deck's spectacular plunge pool, taps into long-held local knowledge about medicinal valley plants. Coca leaves are natural antioxidants, muna (Peruvian mint) is good for altitude sickness, while eucalyptus oil clears the respiratory tract.

To an ambient backing track – I'm happy to report it didn't include panpipes – I am exfoliated with salt from the Inca mine at nearby Maras. "I follow Andean traditions," explains spa director Talia Luna. "The Incas didn't use reiki, but knew all about the transfer of cosmic energy by hands. They were strongly connected to the natural world and the mountains."

I'm pretty certain that connection didn't involve squealing four-wheel, all-terrain vehicles. But with more visitors now staying in the valley – and Louis Vuitton luggage replacing backpacks – Cusco adventure experts, Loreto Tours, have opened a well-equipped base downriver from Rio Sagrado. "Our clients now come from a range of five-star hotels but there's still a big call for adrenaline activities around this area," stresses owner Mateo Ochoa.

## THE NEW PERU

### High style at high altitude

#### Puyuncuy House, Mollepata

Dramatic views of the snow-kissed Andes are part of the package at Puyuncuy, which opened last March, 90 minutes' drive west from Cusco. With terracotta walls, wood floors and local textiles, the boutique adventure lodge works either as somewhere to acclimatise before tackling the Salkantay trail to Machu Picchu, or as a base for hiking and horse riding. From £143pp per night, [www.cuscocasapuyuncuy.com](http://www.cuscocasapuyuncuy.com)

#### MV Aria, Iquitos

Offering three-, four- and seven-night cruises from Iquitos along the Amazon and tributary rivers, the Aria cruise ship will bring a touch of contemporary cool to the Peruvian jungle when it launches this April. The 16 suites, Jacuzzi and gourmet restaurant will provide a luxury floating base for piranha fishing.

wildlife spotting with expert guides and a visit to Pacaya Samiria, the 5m-acre national reserve with its extraordinary birdlife and animals, including the pink river dolphin. From £1,585pp full-board for three nights, [www.aquaexpeditions.com](http://www.aquaexpeditions.com)

#### El Mapi Hotel, Machu Picchu Pueblo

This relaxed accommodation from "byInkaterra" – the cheaper arm of eco-tourism pioneers Inkater – opened last summer. The 48 rooms,



Hotel Titilaka by Lake Titicaca

cafeteria and bar introduce an uncluttered, almost Scandinavian functionality to the Peruvian cloud forest, while its outdoor thermal pool and piped oxygen soften the blow for any guests daunted by a climb to the ruins. Doubles from £124 including breakfast, [www.elmapihotel.com](http://www.elmapihotel.com)

#### Hotel Titilaka, Lake Titicaca

Another distinctive design by Jordi Puig – the man behind El MaPi Hotel in Aguas Calientes – brings cool, unfussy style to a peninsula 20 miles outside Puno. All 18 rooms have lake views, heated floors and bathrooms with oversized freestanding tubs and rain showers. As well as the hotel's funky lighting and sofas, it offers creative Andean cuisine – fava bean gumbo anyone? – and trips to floating islands and colonial churches. Doubles from £187 including breakfast, [www.titilaka.com](http://www.titilaka.com)

"We offer the same excitement – rafting, climbing, biking – but with a far higher level of comfort."

I'm all for that. But nature doesn't necessarily follow the new upmarket regime. I arrive to find landslides have left the Urubamba muddy and uninviting rather than sacred. As shafts of sunlight drill through bruised clouds, quad bikes are more appealing than river rafts.

Their 1,500cc engines, whining like super-sized mosquitoes, are a savage intrusion on the serenity. But all is forgiven after 20km on red dirt tracks deliver us to 3,300m. We stop, remove our helmets and breathe slowly. Laid out before us, across shimmering fields of high-altitude wheat, is a vast panorama of peaks and vertiginous cliffs. Veils of mist open and shut like theatre curtains, providing glimpses of the snaking river and railway far below. If you can't write that difficult second symphony here, you won't write it anywhere.

And the best is yet to come. Close to

Maras, the town that once boomed on the profits of Inca salt mines clinging to nearby hills, we turn off the rough agricultural track. At a perfect viewpoint opposite the glaciers of Chicon and San Juan, a smartly dressed waiter is putting the finishing touches to an Orient Express picnic on a bright local weave. Exquisite pork rolls, honey chicken, pasta and flutes of bucks fizz – an offering to guests, rather than gods – are conclusive proof that luxury, with all bells and whistles attached, really has arrived in the heart of the Sacred Valley.

## Details

Ian Belcher travelled with Abercrombie and Kent ([www.abercrombiekent.co.uk](http://www.abercrombiekent.co.uk)) which offers 10 days in Peru from £3,575 per person, staying in Orient Express hotels, including two nights at Rio Sagrado, domestic flights, transfers and excursions

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