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**Deepak Babani:
Eros Group's Success Story
Indians In Japan
Kenya: Photo Essay
Dad's, Daughters & Dating
Marriage For A Green Card
The Idea of 'Desh Aur Diaspora'**



Peru: Machu Picchu

Marvelous & Mysterious

We understand why The Lost Incan City of Machu Picchu, Peru, tops many a “bucket list”: high in the Andes Mountains, this is a place that enchants.

By: Kathy Newbern & J.S. Fletcher

It's an image that you'll remember for a lifetime: 15th-century ruins of stone-fronted, bright-green, stacked terraces, stone temples, stone stairs, walkways and streets all perched on a precipice nearly 8,000 feet up.

Visitors usually arrive here by train from Cusco to the little town of Agua Calientes, named for the local thermal springs. But now it's officially called Machu Picchu Pueblo, predicated on the rise in tourism after the site was voted one of the New Seven Wonders of the World. We opt to arrive via one of the world's great train trips: the Cusco-to-Machu Picchu Hiram Bingham train that accommodates 84 passengers in “a world of polished wood, gleaming cutlery and glittering glass.”

The train descends through a panorama of landscapes,



Alpacas graze as tourists explore Machu Picchu
(Photo by: Kathy M. Newbern)

including patchwork farms, some still using terrace systems. Soon, the plains narrow as we enter a deep gorge carved by the

Pomatales River until it meets the Urubamba River. There are glimpses of an ancient, abandoned highway that led to the rubber plantations of the Amazon.

In the open-ended observation car, passengers eagerly snap photos and record video of the scenic Sacred Valley of the Inca while being serenaded by a guitarist and singer.

Remarkably, Machu Picchu wasn't “found” until July 1911 by Yale University archaeologist Hiram Bingham when local residents led him to the site - its name in translation means “ancient summit” or “old mountain.”

Bingham wrote, “The sanctuary was lost for centuries because this ridge is located in the most inaccessible corner of a hard-to-reach section of the central Andes... yet, here,

Kiran Srivastava with his wife Jyoti



*Machu Picchu ruins are at a breathtaking
10,000 feet elevation in Peru (Photo by: J.S. Fletcher)*

in a remote part of the canyon, on this narrow ridge flanked by tremendous precipices, a highly civilized people, artistic, inventive, well organized, and capable of sustained endeavor, at some time in the distant past built themselves a sanctuary for the worship of the sun.”

Nearly intact in Bingham’s day was a village that seemed to sprout from the mountains. An estimated thousand people inhabited 200-some structures,

included in the train passage as is the bus, guided tour, afternoon tea at The Lodge, plus cocktails and a four-course, wine dinner on the return. There’s no better way to get here and be more pampered in the process, but there are travel options for all budgets.

Our long-anticipated visit to Machu Picchu does not disappoint. We savor our first views: stone ruins and terraces dating back six centuries, llamas

light up the temple.

There’s the Guardhouse above the terraces, the Main Square and Main Gate, and the dry moat dividing the agricultural and urban sectors, including the Sacred District, the Popular District and the District of the Priests and the Nobility.

He stops to show us the site’s observatory, plus the huge sundial Intihuatana Stone or “hitching post of the sun,” which was a precise indicator of the two equinoxes.

There’s also the Ceremonial Rock, Palace of the Princess, (its name a mystery), Temple of the Three Windows, Group of the Three Doorways, plus the Temple of the Condor.

Romulo weaves stories of wealth, science, religion and culture amid the dry-stone craftsmanship everywhere, making us all question why such a site was abandoned.

Nearly 3,000 people a day visit Machu Picchu on the peak days of the “dry season,” May-September, and amazingly, 70 percent make it only a day trip. That’s a shame because that’s not enough time to experience the magical effect of South America’s most famous archaeological site.

A one-day guided tour generally will only cover the main grounds. Stay longer to climb to the Sun Gate, as we did, or even climb Machu Picchu mountain and Huayna (pronounced Wayna) Picchu. The adventurous and fit might tackle all three; many manage two.

Our Sun Gate hike was worth every step (though we’d wisely pre-booked massages at



One of the whitewashed casitas at Inkaterra in Machu Picchu, an intimate 85-cottage luxury hotel in a sprawling Andean style village within 12 secluded acres (Photo by: Inkaterra)

many deemed religious.

From the rail station, a private bus carries our group slowly up the narrow, switchback-laden dirt road to the site. There are audible “ahhhs” when the ruins, also known as the historical reserve, first come into view. Seconds later, we arrive outside the only hotel at the ruins, Machu Picchu Sanctuary Lodge. (But we’ll be staying two nights back in town at the unique Inkaterra Machu Picchu).

Site admission (\$40) is

lazily munching grass, cloud-topped mountain-surrounds, and the tiny dot of the town and toy-like blue train far below beside the winding Urubamba River.

Our guide, Romulo, takes us through the ruins in about three hours, each new vista as mesmerizing as the last. He points out the highlights, including The Temple of the Sun, where during the winter solstice (in the southern hemisphere), a shaft of sunlight shines through the sole trapezoid-shaped window to

Inkaterra for the evening).

From 1200 to 1533, the Incan Empire, centered in Peru, ruled land in South America that stretched from what is current-day Ecuador down the Andes Mountains to the southern tip of Chile. At its zenith, the estimated population was 12 million.

The Incans worshiped the sun, developed a calendar, and traded with other cultures. They built roads, aqueducts, and massive, stone structures that rivaled those produced by the finest stonemasons anywhere. And yet the empire fell to Spanish conquistador Francisco Pizarro within two years of his arrival.

This mountaintop city survived because of its secluded, sheltered location.

IF YOU'RE GOING

Our journey was an add-on after a Galapagos luxury cruise adventure with Abercrombie & Kent, which offers customized Machu Picchu itineraries with expert guides. Visit www.abercrombiekent.com or call 800.554.7016.

Plan to spend a day or two in Cusco to get acclimated to the altitude. (The city's at 11,150 feet; Machu Picchu's nearly 8,000). The bustling city plaza has a restored cathedral built over one of the most important Inca temples. Four blocks away is San Blas, the colorful arts shopping district with zigzag streets.

For stylish, serene accommodations, try Inkaterra



Walkway from the train platform to Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel, a luxury property boasting the world's largest orchid collection, which guests can tour with a guide. (Photo by: Inkaterra)

La Casona, a boutique hotel in a former manor house with 11 suites (ask for one of the two plaza suites). Impeccable services start with you personal concierge, who will arrange tours, dining, trains, taxis and more. It continues a few minutes later with the arrival of coca tea (to increase oxygen absorption and combat altitude sickness). Details: www.inkaterra.com or 800.442.5042.

PeruRail trains run daily from Cusco to Machu Picchu (www.perurail.com). The luxury Hiram Bingham train departs at 9 daily from Poroy, a 20-minute taxi ride from Cusco. Visit www.orient-express.com and click on luxury trains, or call 800.524.2420.

Local buses, \$12 roundtrip, make the 20-minute trip from the town of Machu Picchu to the Machu Picchu historical reserve about every 30-40 minutes, 5:30 a.m.-1:30 p.m. Return buses run 10:30 a.m.-5:45 p.m.

To enter the site, you'll need the equivalent of \$40 in local currency, cash only.

LUXURY ACCOMODATION:

* The Machu Picchu Sanctuary Lodge, the only hotel adjacent to the site, (machupicchu.orient-express.com or 800.237.1236)

* The award winning, eco-conscious Inkaterra Machu Picchu, (www.inkaterra.com), 85 casitas (rooms) amid grounds boasting the world's largest private collection of indigenous orchids (372 species - tours are free). They also plus a gourmet restaurant with free, happy-hour pisco sours, a swimming pool, and UNU Spa with private, outdoor hot tub for two tucked in the foliage. A spa highlight is the Andean sauna treatment, a candlelit sweat-lodge experience in an "igloo" of indigenous bamboo and fresh eucalyptus leaves that smell heavenly. Details: inkaterra.com/en/machupicchu or 800.442.5042.

U.S. based, award-winning travel writers Kathy M. Newbern and J.S. Fletcher write about luxury, spas, cruising and romantic destinations worldwide when not operating their personalized romance novel company, YourNovel.com, where they put you in the middle of the romance and adventure by starring in your own book.