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Our sleuth investigates the curative claims of wellbeing retreats worldwide

UNU SPA, MACHU PICCHU, PERU

The spa A one-day hike from the ruins at Machu Picchu, the Inkaterra Machu Picchu consists of 85 *casitas* or luxury *pueblos* with log fires, set in 24 acres of Peruvian jungle, thick with fuchsia, orchids, vines, spectacled bears, and 160 species of birds.

Spa Spy squashed ripe avocado underfoot as she made her way to the Yacu therapy room. Unu Spa offers a mystical Andean approach to pampering. "Unu" means water and "Yacu" big river in Quechua, the native language. Its signature treatment is the two-hour Inka Purification, using coca leaf (yes, that naughty substance) in the form of oils, masks, and creams to detoxify and improve blood circulation (£50). All the spa products are extracted from Andean plants, flowers and tree bark.

Spa Spy's symptoms Swollen feet and aching knees from plodding the Inca Trail. Twenty-seven miles through dense cloud forest, mostly uphill, on granite stairs laid down by the Inca 500 years ago, and just wide enough for one man and his llama.

The prescription First, a foot therapy session (£25 for 25 minutes) that starts with a soak using plant extracts and spring water, followed by a relaxing metatarsal massage and exfoliation using scented oils. For extra indulgence, I booked an Andean Hot Stones body massage (£55 for 2 hours) and sauna (£25 for 45 minutes).

The procedure Magna, who spoke no English, soaked my feet in a bowl of water and eucalyptus leaves before rubbing away rough skin with salts. This did sting, but she followed with a gentle massage using oils scented with mint, mountain lemon and orchids. My feet were throbbing with joy as Magna began the body massage, applying smooth, heated stones from the Urubamba river, which had been coated in lemon oil. She placed them in the palms of my hands and on pressure points down my body, incorporating them into a rhythmic massage. The stones release their warmth into tired and tense muscles, with the aim of promoting inner peace and deep relaxation. Serpentine, an Andean gemstone thought to inspire longevity and retrieve ancient wisdom, was used for the face massage. Then it was into the sauna, which is an Indian "sweat lodge", heated to 30C by river stones.

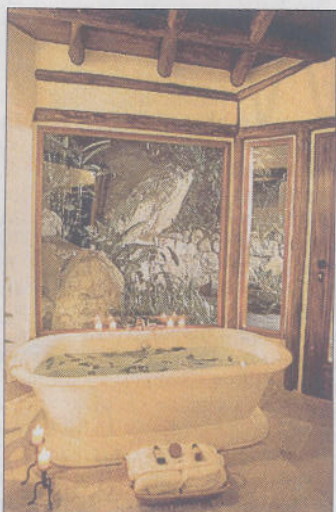
The verdict My feet were smooth, my muscles had been pressed and heated into submission. I began to feel that all that walking had been worth it. I certainly had some inner peace, but others must judge whether I am any wiser.

The medical opinion "Foot massage

is very pleasant after you've been walking," said Edzard Ernst, professor of complementary medicine at the Peninsula Medical School, Exeter. "And eucalyptus is known to have a cooling effect."

"The application of heat, through hot stones, hot spring water or in other ways, is also beneficial to the muscles, but there is no evidence about pressure points in the body. If it made you feel good then it was a success. Sweating relaxes the muscles after any exertion and helps you get a good sleep."

The feelgood factor The spa is in a low hut with a sloping roof hung with white sheets that create a womb-like effect. The foot rub and the massage were deeply relaxing, and, for once, the recorded music of panpipes was highly appropriate. I chilled out lying on a low plank in the dark sweat lodge, which looks like half an inverted coconut. With its low, curved roof, it was much more atmospheric than the usual geometric



Unu Spa: womb-like effect

pine Nordic sauna. In the flickering candlelight and scented steam, you feel as if you are in a Western, sweating out a fever. I languished in the hot springs, divinely contented, watching humming birds flap their wings 75 times a second as they fed from sugar-feeders hung in the trees.

Details Inkaterra Machu Picchu (0808 101 2224, www.inkaterra.com) offers doubles from £170. Journey Latin America (020 8747 8315, www.journeylatinamerica.co.uk) offers an eight-night holiday visiting Machu Picchu by Orient Express, including two nights at the Inkaterra Machu Picchu and return flights from Heathrow and internal connections, from £2,558 per person.

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