

On the high road to ruins

Avoiding the tourist trail to Machu Pichu gives **Graeme Green** the measure of Incan devotion

Daylight rises over the ridge. A white mist drifts across the terraces of the former Lost City of the Incas, sun breaking on the tips of the surrounding peaks. "I'm struggling to keep it together," says Margot, a Californian, as she witnesses the classic view. Her eyes are welling up with tears.

This is the power Machu Pichu still holds. Tomorrow marks the 100th anniversary of its "discovery" by American explorer and Yale University professor Hiram Bingham. Despite the daily crowds that swarm the site and ubiquity of photographs of one of the seven wonders of the world, it can still take you by surprise. The anniversary is not without controversy, largely because few people are sure exactly how much of a discovery it was. After Bingham made Machu Pichu (Old Mountain in the Quechua language) famous, a series of European adventurers, travellers and missionaries came out of the woodwork to declare they'd already visited, mapped or at least knew of the existence of the "lost city", in some cases many decades prior to Bingham's expedition.

The existence of the city was certainly known to the indigenous people who lived nearby, some of whom were using the complex's agricultural terraces for farming. Bingham was told about the existence of ruins at the top of a mountain by a local farming family while he was searching for Vilcabamba, supposedly the last resting place of the Incas. People knew they were there; they just didn't realise their potential value. "The morning of July 24th dawned in a cold drizzle," Bingham recalled. "Arteaga (the local farmer) shivered and seemed inclined to stay in his hut. When asked where the ruins were, he pointed straight up to the top of the mountain. No-one supposed they would be particularly interesting, and no-one cared to go with me."

As with David Livingstone's finding of the Smoke That Thunders in Zambia (which he renamed Victoria Falls) or Henri Mouhot's popularising of Angkor Wat in Cambodia, Bingham's feat was realising the importance of what he'd seen and communicating it to the outside world. "Thanks to Hiram Bingham, Machu Pichu is known all over the world," says Washington, our guide. "But he didn't discover it. He rediscovered it."

Bingham's scientific discovery made him famous; some claim he was the inspiration

for Indiana Jones. He wrote bestselling books before becoming a US senator.

But more controversial than his "discovery" was his plundering of Incan artifacts. Up to 40,000 pieces of Peru's cultural heritage, including idols, mummies and ceramics, are thought to have been taken out of the country by Bingham. Washington says: "When he left Peru, he took with him all the Inca artifacts he found in Machu Pichu."

The Peruvian government has since been requesting their return, reaching an agreement with Yale University that saw 4000 pieces given back in 2008. But there's plenty still to come. There are plans to build a museum near Machu Pichu which will be filled with the returned artefacts.

Getting to Machu Pichu is as much a part of the experience as the destination itself. The famous Inca Trail is crowded and often requires booking many months in advance, but there are plenty of other treks. I opt for the Salkantay Route. Taking in mountains, forests, rivers and the 15,253ft (4650m) high Salkantay Pass, this is far more off the beaten track than the Inca Trail. In six days, we see farmers and horsemen, but only a handful of other hikers.

Our first view of Salkantay mountain comes on the drive from the high-altitude city of Cusco, where for the last month, leading up to the big day, there have been Bingham-related exhibitions, dances, ceremonies and processions. In a cloudless blue sky, Salkantay stands out, a pure-white glacial peak.

The first day's gentle hike through green countryside is a test not only of legs but lungs; at these altitudes, the low-oxygen air can leave you breathless. The snowy peaks of Salkantay and Humantay loom ahead at the end of the day.

The paths we'll be walking on are in many places the trails used by the Incas, says Washington, though their purposes were different. "The concept of the Inca civilisation was that these mountains were considered sacred," he says. "The Incas didn't have a concept of climbing for a challenge. When they went to those mountains, it was to bring offerings."

There's time the next day for more acclimatisation with another relatively easy hike up to Humantay lake. An Andean condor is visible as we set off, gliding high above us. Slow-drifting ghosts of cloud hang in the glen below the mighty Salkantay. We



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Once a university, a royal retreat and a harem, Machu Pichu now hosts flocks of tourists and roaming fauna

PHOTOGRAPH: PHOTOLIBRARY.COM

quickly leave the green valley and chimes of cowbells (worn by mules and horses) and move up into ice and snow, navigating thin paths around the mountainside. Soraypampa lake appears over a ridge, framed by vast walls of rock, ice and snow. The clear, intensely cold water ripples in the sunlight as the wind whips across it.

Day three is when things start to get serious. High up in the snowy landscape of the Rio Blanco valley, we trudge up a tight series of climbing switchbacks. One of our team, taken ill by the altitude, rides up on the support horse. The path is a mush of ice and snow; I can feel the lack of oxygen and a heaviness in my legs. It's slow work. The air's thin and cold enough to turn the surface of the running river to ice. Thick icicles hang from slick, black rocks.

A brutal wind whistles through the pass as we continue upwards. Giant, jagged, dark boulders jut out from the snow; the bright jackets and fleeces of fellow hikers are rare dots of colour; the landscape otherwise starkly beautiful white and black.

I reach the top first, placing a rock on a cairn, then find shelter from the wind to

wait for the others. An avalanche rumbles down the mountainside across from the pass as they trickle in. Once the group's together, we pose next to the summit marker for a victorious group shot, then quickly leave the wind and snow behind. The landscape becomes greener, the weather warmer, as we bound down the hill towards hot drinks and hot showers at the night's lodge.

It's unlikely Bingham travelled with the creature comforts we experience. Although the route is remote and the terrain sometimes difficult, there's a series of small luxury lodges along the way. Three-course meals, showers and windows looking out on to epic landscapes certainly ease the aches at the end of each day.

The group makes the trip too. You can never predict who you'll be in close company with on these kinds of trips, but day after day our band of 10 – mostly Americans and a hardy paramedic from Lanark completing the challenging trail on crutches – are great companions. One day, I'm so deep in conversation with an American girl that we miss the rendezvous point by five miles.

We spend several more days after the pass hiking through green forests, farmland and coffee plantations, crossing fast-flowing rivers and climbing hillside trails. En route to another high pass we pass three locals standing on a ridge with mobile phones, the best (or only) spot in the valley for reception. Big old agave plants line the paths.

The trail takes us to the ruins of Llactapacta, a small site also uncovered by Bingham. From here, we get our first view of Machu Pichu, nestled in the pointed Vilcabamba mountains. We're still more than a kilometre away but can make out the terraces and walls of the ancient citadel, the peaks of Machupichu and Waynapichu to either side. We stay in the town of Aguas Calientes and next morning join the tourist hordes taking buses to Machu Pichu. Once there, our group gathers on a terrace to watch the famous sunrise, the city lighting up.

The construction of Machu Pichu is thought to have been instigated by the Inca king Pachacuti around the 1440s. It took 20,000 people 70 years to build. But Machu Pichu was never finished; it was abandoned in 1532, shortly after the Spanish invaded. The incomers never found Machu Pichu, one reason why it's still in such good condition. The city's split into agricultural and urban areas, its smart and crisp white granite walls created by slotting together rocks that were laboriously shaped and smoothed to fit without cement or mortar.

Machu Pichu was home to around 1000 people and existed mainly as a royal retreat and a university. As the Incas expanded their empire, they absorbed and expanded on knowledge from those they conquered to become masters of astronomy, agriculture, maths, science and engineering. It's also believed the city served as a royal harem – more than 75% of the skeletons discovered were female. "The king had one wife, but hundreds of concubines," Washington says with an enthusiastic grin.

The Peruvian flag flies on a ridge above as we explore the urban complex. "When Bingham found this, it was covered in vegetation. It took five years to clear," says Washington.

By late morning, the site's busy with tourists, though it's just large enough not to feel overcrowded. Washington points out plazas, temples and a huge chunk of granite carved into a sun dial. "It was very important for the Incas, as farmers, to know what season they were in."

I hike up the peak of Waynapichu (Young Peak) with my walking companion Sarah and her brother Scott. Access to the trail is restricted to 400 people per day, but after 90 minutes of queueing and a little bribery, we're in. It's a steep hour-long climb up a rocky path and slippery stone steps that aren't big enough to fit a whole foot. An iron rail beside the path is a lifesaver. Travellers sit in the sun on rocks at the summit. From here, you get a unique perspective of the entire site, the work of Bingham, Pachacuti and 20,000 Peruvians. But you can also see far across the mountain ranges and green valleys that stretch in all directions where there are said to be many other Inca sites, large and small, still to be "discovered". ■

LATE DEALS

Thomson Cruises (www.thomson.co.uk/cruise, 0871 231 3243) has seven nights on board Thomson Celebration's **Aegean Adventure** from £742pp. Price includes full board, ship transfers and return flights from Edinburgh departing August 8.

Sunset (www.thomsoncook.com, 0844 412 5970) has seven nights in **Turkey** from £350pp based on four sharing. Price includes self-catering in a two-star hotel/apartment and return flights from Glasgow departing August 20.

Barhead Travel (www.barheadtravel.co.uk, 0871 879 8191) has seven nights in **Majorca** from £259pp. Price includes self-catering in a three-star hotel and return flights from Glasgow departing August 7.

Manos (www.manos.co.uk, 0844 879 8200) has seven nights in **Rhodes** from £280pp. Price includes self-catering in a three-star studio and return flights from Glasgow departing August 17.

Direct Holidays (www.directholidays.co.uk, 0844 879 8191) has seven nights in **Bulgaria** from £384pp. Price includes half board in a three-star hotel and return flights from Glasgow departing August 8.

Ebookers (www.ebookers.com) has three nights in **Madrid** from £282pp. Price includes room-only in a three-star hotel and return flights from Edinburgh departing August 23.

TRAVEL NOTES

GETTING THERE AND WHERE TO STAY

Graeme Green flew with British Airways, which has fares from Glasgow or Edinburgh to Lima from £1025 via London

Heathrow and Miami, or from £1040 via Heathrow and Madrid. Visit www.ba.com or call 0844 493 0787. Book flights from Lima to Cusco at www.taca.com.

Mountain Kingdoms' Luxury Lodges to Machu Pichu packages along the Salkantay Route start from £2095, including accommodation, meals, transport and expert

guides, or £3445 including flights from London. Visit www.mountainkingdoms.com or call 01453 844400. Graeme Green also stayed at Inkaterra La Casona in Cusco

(£445 for patio suite) and Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel in Aguas Calientes (£154 for a superior casita). Visit www.inkaterra.com.