



Source: Gwent Gazette (Ebbw Vale) {Television}
 Edition:
 Country: UK
 Date: Thursday 15, May 2014
 Page: 28,29
 Area: 808 sq. cm
 Circulation: ABC 3609 Weekly
 Ad data: page rate £1,376.00, scc rate £5.60
 Phone: 029 2058 3583
 Keyword: Inkaterra



TRAVEL with Sarah Marshall
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Eco-adventure in the Incas' empire

Respect for nature was at the heart of Inca culture and today, Peruvian hotel brand **Inkaterra** is echoing those ideals in Machu Picchu, Cusco and the Sacred Valley. SARAH MARSHALL learns luxury and sustainability can coexist

I'VE given and received some weird presents in my time, but none quite compare to a dried-up lama foetus.

Spindly and alien-like, the dehydrated carcass would be a more appropriate gift for an enemy, but it forms the key offering to Pachamama, the goddess of Peru's Quechua people.

Practised in South America's Andean regions, the despacho ceremony is used to connect with nature and ask for good fortune, often when crops are harvested.

But Daniel, a shaman

from Peru's Sacred Valley, is performing the ritual to welcome me to the cloud forests of Machu Picchu, the Inca citadel where it's hard not to worship nature's beauty.

In the past, Incas sacrificed live llamas, but today people rely on natural miscarriages.

After blowing a conch shell to summon the mountain spirits, Daniel asks me to help him make kintu - fans of cocoa leaves stuck together with lama fat. He raises these to the peaks, praising Apu Machu Picchu, Apu Wayna Picchu and even,

endearingly, Apu Ben Nevis. (I don't have the heart to tell him I'm not from Scotland.)

Finally, he wraps a collection of corn kernels, sequins, jelly babies, biscuits and dollar bills in garish, rose-patterned foil wrapping paper.

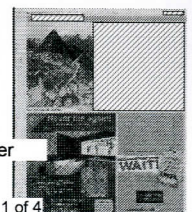
Before heading into the forest to burn the offering, Daniel pours ceremonial tipples on the earth - wine, corn beer and that Coca-Cola - and wafts a water-dipped eagle feather up and down my spine.

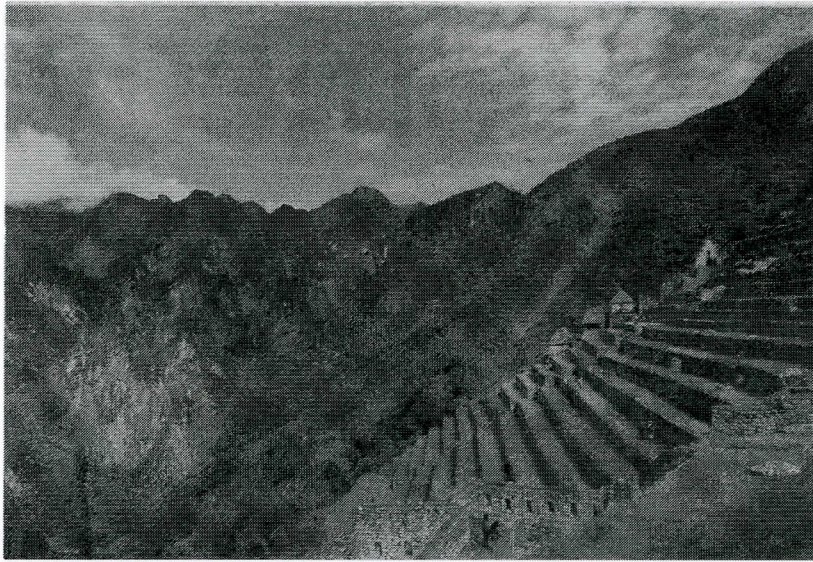
Celebrating nature and Peru's cultural heritage

is central to the ethos of eco-tourism company **Inkaterra**, so the rite is a fitting activity to offer guests at their Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel in Aguas Calientes, where I'm staying.

Starting out in 1975 as a lodge and research centre in the Peruvian rainforest, **Inkaterra** now operates five boutique properties in the Amazon, Cusco and Machu Picchu, with profits invested in research, conservation and social programmes.

The Machu Picchu Pueblo was originally a campsite for backpackers, but





Left, terraces at Machu Picchu, and right, a Quechua lady with a lamb in Cusco

PA PHOTO/SARAH MARSHALL

now the palm leaf-roofed lodges, hot tubs and first-class restaurant offer much greater comfort.

The ideology, however, remains the same, and visitors who come to Machu Picchu often end up spending more time enjoying the flora and fauna in the hotel grounds.

Hot air from the Amazon collides with cool air from the Andes to create a diverse environment where orchids grow from crevices in trees and hummingbirds drink from heliconia flowers.

I settle my magnifying glass on a 4mm orchid, one of 372 native varieties that grow in the hotel's gardens.

Over time, the team of naturalists have discovered 10 new species, and Inkaterra's founder, the coolly charismatic and inspirational Jose Koechlin, has also published a book on the subject.

Behind the orchid garden, I follow an overgrown path to the hotel's spectacled bear sanctuary, where half the South American bear popula-

tion resides. These bears, whose markings make them appear to be wearing spectacles, famously inspired Michael Bond's Paddington Bear.

Inkaterra invites schoolchildren to the sanctuary and aims to educate them about respecting the environment - an idea which is key to the Inca world view.

Walk through the ruins of Machu Picchu and it becomes obvious that nature formed the basis of belief systems. Temples were built with

mathematical precision to capture the sun's rays, mountain peaks were used for worship and animals such as the condor and puma symbolised strength and greatness.

I climb to the top of Cerro Machu Picchu mountain, clambering over granite boulders and through canopies of ferns to reach the 3,000m peak.

I'm stood in a cloud, but when the mist momentarily clears to reveal a lost city in the sky, I understand why Inca emperor Pachacuti chose to

establish his short-lived kingdom here in the 15th century.

The Spanish never made it to the citadel, but many of the artefacts were looted by local farmers, with Hiram Bingham scooping the last lot after discovering the site in 1911.

Some pieces have been returned from America to the new Casa Concha museum in Cusco, the former Inca capital, a four-hour train ride from Aguas Calientes.

A heady 3,400m above sea level, the mountain-fringed city is a fusion of Inca and colonial architecture. Fine examples include Coricancha (the Temple of the Sun) where an 18th-century Dominican church sits on top of large granite blocks once covered in gold, or paintings inside the Cathedral of Santo Domingo, depicting triangular Virgin Marys inspired by sacred mountains.

Many buildings are well-preserved, including **Inkaterra's** 11-suite **La Casona** hotel, a restored 16th-century colonial house on land once used as a training ground for the Inca army. The peaceful courtyard and antique-filled corridors

offer much-needed respite from the frantic activity outdoors.

Cusco thrives on tourism. The narrow hilly streets, where Inca aqueducts can still be found, are filled with women in colourful embroidered Quechua dress, all hoping to pose for photos in exchange for a few coins.

I ask one girl the name of a baby lamb she's cradling. She rolls her eyes with teenage insouciance, flatly replying "baby lamb", then uses her thumb to force the poor animal's top lip into a smile. I duly give her some money and she runs off to buy an ice cream.

Despite the show put on for foreigners, it's still possible to find pockets of authentic local life

in Cusco. In San Pedro market, vendors sell large discs of flat bread and sacks of dusty potatoes.

Many are transported from the Sacred Valley, where **Inkaterra** plan to open a new hotel later this year, with a focus on food and drink. Guests will be invited to collect vegetables from local farmers and pink salt from nearby mines, all for use in cooking classes.

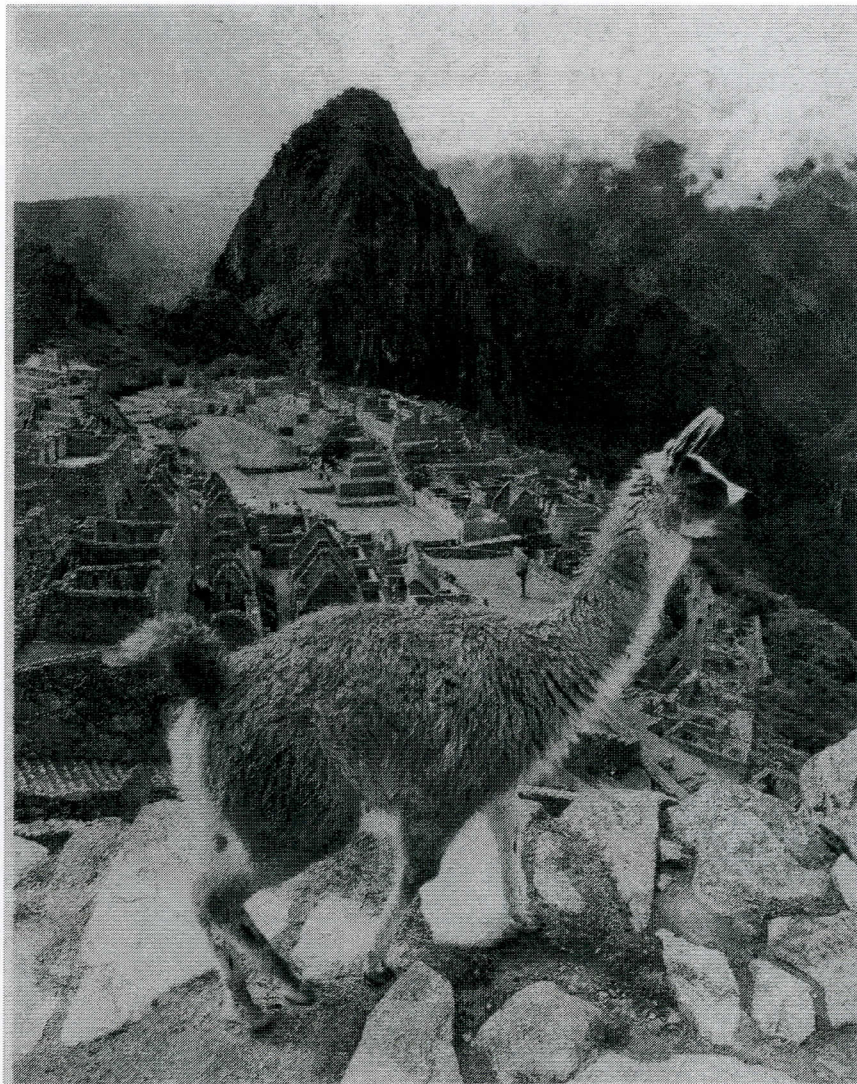
Standing on the porch of the semi-completed building, I enjoy uninterrupted views of mountains covered in forest and wildflowers.

It's easy to see why **Inkaterra** chose this location for what they hope will be a wellbeing retreat - like the Incas, they fully appreciate the power of Pachamama.

TRAVEL FACTS

- Sarah Marshall was a guest of Cox & Kings (020 7873 5000, www.coxandkings.co.uk) who offer an 12-day/10-night private tour to Peru, from £2,195 per person, including flights with Air Europa, transfers, return train tickets to Machu Picchu, excursions and accommodation with breakfast daily.
- A two-night stay at the **Inkaterra Reserva Amazonica** is priced from £660 per person. An one-night upgrade to the **Inkaterra Machu Picchu** costs from £125 per person and a one-night upgrade to the **Inkaterra La Casona** in Cusco costs from £125 per person. For more information, visit www.inkaterra.com

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A lama in front of Machu Picchu citadel in Peru

PA PHOTO/RENATO GRANIERI