



Source: Oldham Evening Chronicle {Main}
 Edition:
 Country: UK
 Date: Friday 9, May 2014
 Page: 17
 Area: 375 sq. cm
 Circulation: Pub Stmt 10347 Daily
 Ad data: page rate £1,350.48, scc rate £6.62
 Phone: 0161 633 2121
 Keyword: Inkaterra

On the eco-tourism trail

Respect for nature was at the heart of Inca culture and hotel brand Inkaterra are echoing that. Sarah Marshall discovers that luxury and sustainability can co-exist

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

The dehydrated carcass (product of a natural miscarriage) forms the key component for an offering to goddess Pachamama; mother earth to the Quechua people.

Daniel, a shaman from Peru's Sacred Valley, is performing this particular ritual to welcome me to the cloud forests of Machu Picchu, the "hidden" Inca citadel where it's difficult not to worship nature's beauty.

Celebrating nature and Peru's cultural heritage is central to the ethos of eco-tourism company Inkaterra, so the despacho is a fitting activity to offer guests at their Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel, below right, in Aguas Calientes, where I'm staying.

Inkaterra operates five boutique and characterful properties in the Amazon, Cusco and Machu Picchu, with profits invested in research, conservation and

social programmes.

The Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel was originally a campsite for backpackers, but 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 initially to visit Machu Picchu end up, often unexpectedly, spending more time enjoying the flora and fauna in the hotel's extensive grounds.

Walk through the ruins of Machu Picchu and it becomes obvious that nature formed the basis of belief systems; temples were built to capture the sun's rays, mountain peaks were used for worship,

and animals such as the condor and puma symbolised strength and greatness.

The mountain-fringed city is a fusion of Inca and Colonial architecture and art. 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 mountains.

Cusco thrives on tourism, and the narrow hilly streets, where Inca aqueducts can still be found, are filled with women in colourful,

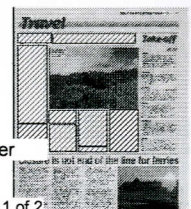
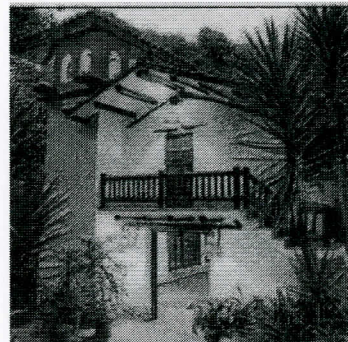
embroidered Quechua dress, all hoping to pose for photos in exchange for a few coins.

Many are transported from the Sacred Valley, where Inkaterra plan to open a new hotel later this year.

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

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.

Sarah Marshall was a guest of Cox & Kings (www.coxandkings.co.uk) who offer an 12-day/10-night private tour, from £2,195 per person, including flights, transfers, return train tickets to Machu Picchu, excursions and accommodation with breakfast daily.



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