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The mysterious mountains of Peru

Sarah Marshall sees the sights as she follows in the footsteps of the Incas

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 component for an offering to goddess Pachamama; mother earth to Peru's Quechua people.

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

But 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.

In the past, Incas would have slaughtered llamas for sacrifice, but today people rely on natural miscarriages. Still, not a pleasant thought to dwell upon.

After blowing a conch shell to summon the mountain spirits, Daniel asks me to help him make kintu – fans of three cocoa leaves stuck together with thick, gloopy lama fat. He raises these to the various 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 our gift – a surreal collection of corn kernels, sequins, jelly babies, car-shaped biscuits (apparently a good addition if you're looking for a new car) and dollar bills – in the kind of garish, rose-covered, foil wrapping paper you might find at Clinton Cards.

Before heading into the forest to burn the offering,

Daniel pours some ceremonial tipples onto the earth – wine, chicha (corn beer) and that prized beverage, Coca-Cola – and wafts an eagle feather dipped in water up and down my spine.

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 in Aguas Calientes, where I'm staying. Some even use it to renew wedding vows.

Starting out in 1975 as a lodge and research centre in the Southern Peruvian rainforest, **Inkaterra** now operate 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 casitas (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.

Hot air from the Amazon collides with cool air from the Andes to create a biodiverse 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 the 372 native varieties that grow in the hotel's gardens, some with amusing names, such as Donald Duck or Lama-faced.

Over time, the team of naturalists have discovered ten 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, being one of only two organisations operating in Peru, half the South American bear population resides. These bears, whose markings make them appear to be wearing spectacles, famously inspired Michael Bond's Paddington Bear character.

With the help of Stephen Fry and a BBC team, Yogi was the first of the five bears to arrive here after being rescued from a 1.5m x 1.5m cage where he was kept by local villagers as a pet. Others, saved from the circus, could once only jump and dance, but have since learned how to climb trees. Sadly, though, few will ever be able to survive fully in the wild again.

Inkaterra's NGO arm, **Inkaterra** Association, invites school children to the sanctuary and aims to educate them about respecting the environment – an idea which is key to the Inca ideology.

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, sweating as I clamber 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.

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 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 sacred mountains.

Many buildings have been 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.

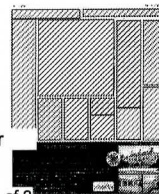
Cusco thrives on tourism, and the narrow hilly streets, where Inca aqueducts can still be found, are filled with women in colourful, embroidered Quechua dress, all hoping to pose for photos in exchange for a few coins.

In San Pedro market, vendors sell large discs of flat chuta bread and sacks of dusty potatoes, some of the 3,000 varieties grown in Peru. Many are transported from the Sacred Valley, where **Inkaterra** plan to open a new hotel later this year, with a food and drink focus.

Guests will be invited to collect vegetables from farmers working in the area, 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 wild flowers.

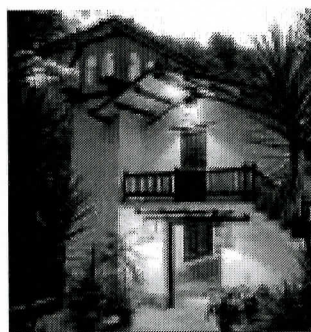
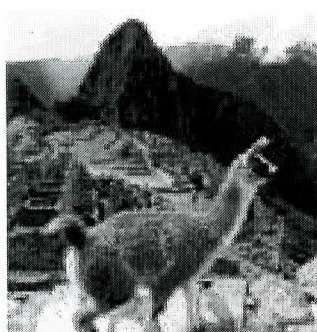
It's easy to see why **Inkaterra** chose this location for what they hope will be a well-being retreat; like the Incas, they fully appreciate the power of Pachamama.



Travel facts

■ Sarah Marshall was a guest of Cox & Kings (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. A 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.



Clockwise from main picture, a street in Cusco, Peru; a Quechua woman and child; Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel; and a lama in front of Machu Picchu citadel