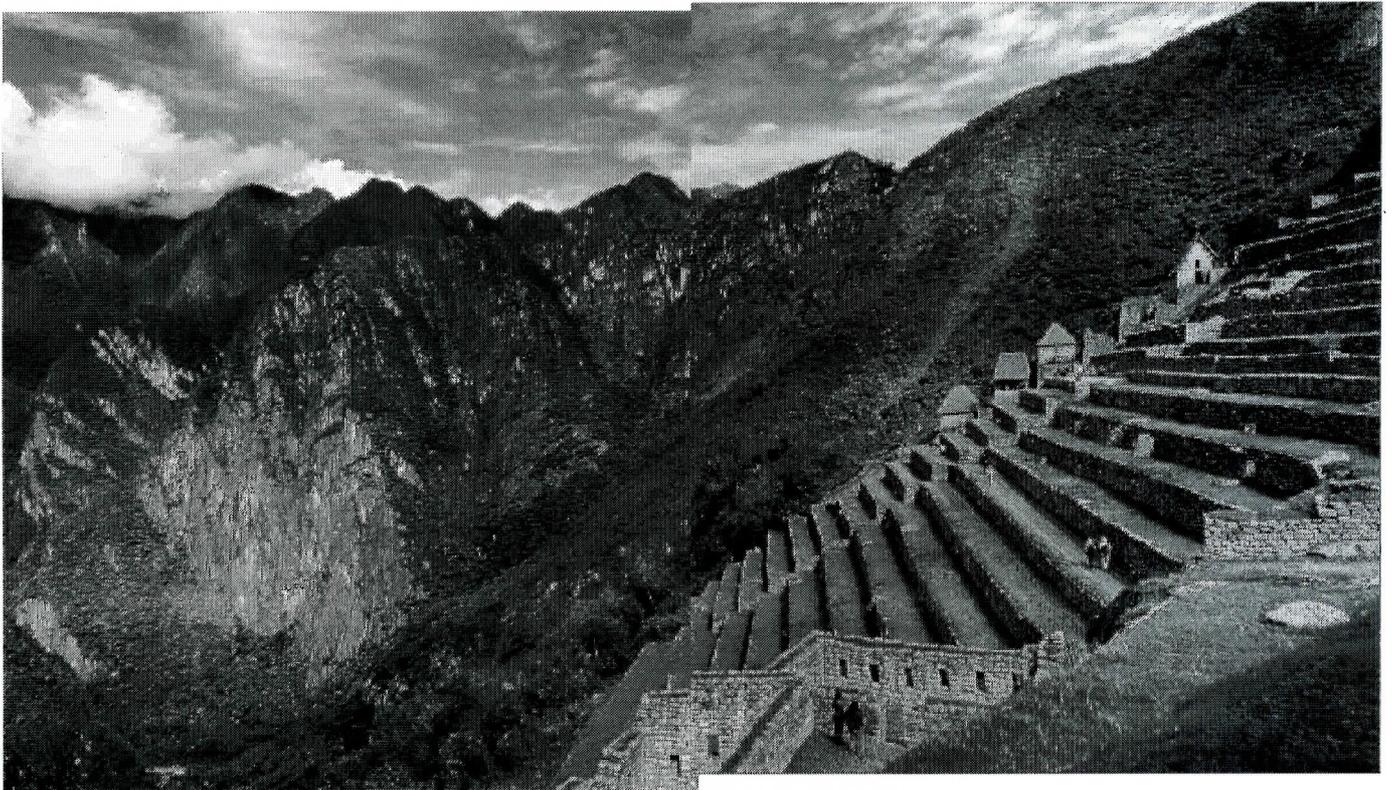
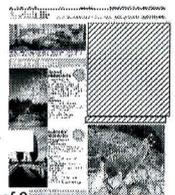


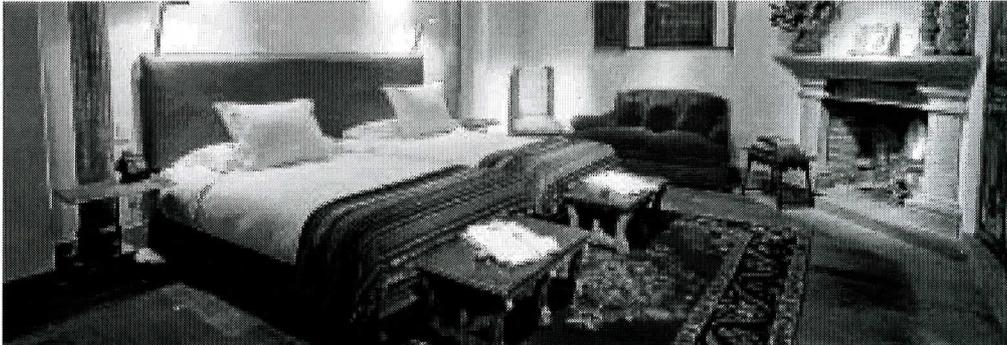


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EXTRAORDINARY LANDSCAPE: Peru is a country in western South America. It is bordered in the north by Ecuador and Colombia, in the east by Brazil, in the southeast by Bolivia, in the south by Chile, and in the west by the Pacific Ocean.





CULTURAL HERITAGE: 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 Casana, pictured, in Cusco costs from £125 per person.



BEASTS' BURDEN: Incan and pre-Incan culture placed llamas and llama parts in the burials of important people, as offerings or provisions for the afterlife. For the Inca nobility, the llama was of symbolic significance.

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ARMY ROLE:

The La Casona hotel is a restored 16th century colonial house, on land once used as a training ground for the Inca army with a courtyard and antique-filled corridors offering welcome respite.



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The weirdest of gifts in land of the Inca

I HAVE given and received some weird presents in my time, but none quite compare to a dried-up llama foetus, writes Sarah Marshall.

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 llama 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.

Celebrating nature and Peru's cultural heritage is central to the ethos of eco-tourism company **Inkaterra**.

Starting out in 1975 as a lodge and research centre in

"I don't have the heart to tell him I'm not from Scotland"

the Southern Peruvian rain-forest, **Inkaterra** now operates five boutique and characterful properties in the Amazon, Cusco and Machu Picchu, with profits invested in research, conservation and social programmes.

Cusco, is the former Inca capital. 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.

■ Sarah was a guest of Cox & Kings (020 7873 5000; www.coxandkings.co.uk) which offers 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. For more information, visit www.inkaterra.com.



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