

Machu Picchu just one of Peru's many highlights for travellers

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Machu Picchu, Peru. Picture: iStock Source: Supplied

IT would have to be one of the most dramatic descents in the world. As our plane approaches Alejandro Velasco Astete Airport in Cusco, Peru, it makes a sweep that reveals icy slices of tropical glaciers. Then, with a tip of a wing, comes a patchwork mural of red roofs, white spires and terracotta squares.

The view is stunning but the passenger next to me, a leathery farmer who says he's heading home from Lima, has his eyes squeezed shut. His fingers clutch rosary beads as he prays softly in Quechua, the native language of eight million people across the central Andes; I catch an alarmed *ay dios mio* burst out in explosive clusters as our small plane, buffeted by crosswinds, undulates like a mule's backside.

The drama doesn't end when we land (an event the farmer marks with an extravagant sign of the cross). Out of the blue, Cusco's dreaded *soroche*, or high-altitude sickness, has us suddenly in its grip. The crowds press in, the ground lurches, and my heart strains for oxygen in the thin, cool air. At almost 3400m above sea level, Cusco, the ancient capital of the Inca empire, has this effect on some of the thousands of tourists who visit each year.

Fortunately, there are handy oxygen tanks available in hotels, pharmacies, restaurants and hospitals all over the Andes. Our case is mild but my travel companion, Guiliana, has turned a pale green, while I'm gasping like a beached sand mullet. Luckily, our guide, Javier, spots the signs, quickly offering dark chocolate and reviving coca leaf tea.

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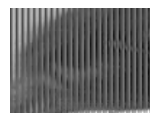
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When in Rome, fang it



STEVE WATTE
NO wonder Italians love life so much. The way they drive, they are all mere seconds from dying.

It's the first of many small mercies performed by Javier, tour operator Abercrombie & Kent's guardian angel who accompanies us on a three-day luxury Andean tour taking in Cusco, the Sacred Valley and Machu Picchu.

Within minutes, we're well enough to head up the steep cobbled streets of the arty neighbourhood of San Blas and then back down to the bustling hub of Plaza de Armas, full this morning with tourists, local workers and colourfully dressed Quechua women, complete with ridiculously long-lashed pet alpacas on leashes, fat babies in papooses, bright *polleras* (traditional layered skirts) and bowler hats, a sartorial tradition since the 1920s after they were imported by British railway workers.

Our first stop is the imposing Santo Domingo Church, built on the foundations of Koricancha, an Incan shrine dedicated to the worship of the sun. Inside, Javier, a native Andean, takes great satisfaction in pointing out how the Inca's superbly crafted "anti-seismic" foundations stood firm during multiple earthquakes while the Spanish add-ons, built following the arrival of the conquistadors led by Francisco Pizarro in 1534, crumbled. A sly rebellion is embedded in the very architecture and art of Cusco, he reveals. In a gloomy chapel, he points out paintings by native artists from the Cusco School, which combined 17th-century European devotional painting styles with indigenous Andean aesthetics. Many works feature Spanish noblewomen or the Virgin Mary in big bell skirts that pay covert tribute to Pachamama, or Mother Earth.

Cultural syncretism, the blending of beliefs, is everywhere on the walls of the nearby Cusco Cathedral, most particularly in a famous picture of *The Last Supper* by Marcos Zapata showing Christ and the Apostles about to tuck into a *cuy*, or guinea pig, and Judas bearing a suspicious resemblance to the murderous Pizarro.

The old ways remain alive and kicking, says Javier, in local festivals such as Inti Raymi, the annual Inca celebration of the winter solstice, or, more clandestinely, in savage ancient rituals such as the Feast of Blood, or Yawar Fiesta, held in remote mountain villages in July to celebrate Peru's Independence Day. The ritual features a condor being caught, drugged with alcohol and then tied to the back of a bull. "The condor represents the Inca nation, and it tries to scratch out the eyes of the bull, which is Spain," Javier explains. "Many villagers are Christian, but they see the condor as a god that has come to defeat the conquistadors."

After lunch, we head higher up to the colossal Incan ruins of Sacsayhuaman, where I spot my first wild alpaca peacefully grazing next to the giant granite block structures. The Inca joined the blocks together with such incredible precision, tongue and groove-style, that the Spanish thought the temple had been built by demons, says Javier. He entertains us with wild stories from his younger days, including eating skunk to cure his asthma (it worked, he swears) and smuggling contraband gunpowder into the Amazon to sell (fruitlessly, it turns out) to tribal villagers for use in fishing.

At an altitude of more than 3700m, his stories are taking on a hallucinatory feel. We are at the highest point of our journey and the *soroche* has returned with a vengeance. Thankfully, we're soon heading down, through the beautiful Urubamba Valley, known as the Sacred Valley of the Incas. It is a spectacular descent. We traverse hairpin bends that swing open to reveal slices of the misty green valley below, passing small villages with *cuy* cooking on roadside fires, colourful flags representing local political groups standing in recent elections, clusters of fearsome Quechua matriarchs of mestizo ancestry, recognisable by their tall white bowler hats, and small speak-easies marked by red bags on sticks, selling the popular fermented corn beer, *chicha de jora*. The scenery is stunning, with splashes of reds and greens and ochres offset by icy streaks of white as glaciers appear and disappear, playing peekaboo with each turn around a bend.

It is dusk when we arrive at Sol Y Luna Hotel, a pink gem hidden behind groves of cantuta flowers and prickly pear cactuses. We spend a luxurious night here before continuing our journey the next morning to the picturesque village of Chinchero, filled with pristine adobe homes and artisans' shops.

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Here, Javier tells us the tale of freedom fighter Tupac Amaru, Peru's "Braveheart", who was executed by the Spanish, before we visit the home of native weavers who take us through the weaving and dyeing process (an unfortunate cochineal, a scale insect, is squashed to show how the bright carmine hues are derived).

From Chinchero, we head to the dazzling white salt mines of Maras, where the Inca built terraces to capture the salt from natural springs flowing down the mountains. Then it's on to Moray to witness another marvel of Incan engineering: huge, circular agricultural terraces that form a natural temperature-controlled amphitheatre. Our tummies are rumbling by now, so it's off to a private lunch banquet of suckling pig and Andean trout at the nearby Parador de Moray restaurant where a formally dressed waiter, in a scene straight out of James Bond, stands waiting on a misty hillside with a tray of pisco sours, Peru's national cocktail.

The final stop of the day is the massive Incan fortress of Ollantaytambo, the site of the greatest Inca victory against the Spanish during the wars of conquest. Here, we board the train to Aguas Calientes, a busy hub at the base of Machu Picchu. Staff and porters are waiting to escort us to our accommodation, the eco-friendly Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel.

My room is a two-level suite with an outdoor shower surrounded by rainforest, a private pond, a tea-picking bag (the hotel sits on a lush 5ha, filled with tea plantations and orchid gardens, overlooking the Vilcanota River) and other essentials.

Following an early-morning birdwatching tour through the lush cloud forest (we spot everything from turquoise hummingbirds to a scarlet Andean cock-of-the-rock, Peru's national bird), it's time for the highlight of this journey — a visit to Machu Picchu, the ancient Incan citadel introduced to the modern world by American explorer Hiram Bingham in 1911.

The only way up is by bus, and the unflappable Javier grins as I pray silently, shutting my eyes as we crawl up terrifyingly narrow paths that drop away to the raging river below. Finally, we're there, at the fabled lost city, and it is heart-stopping.

Terraces stretch up a lush, emerald hillside, circling almost 200 structures — the ruins of temples, stables, servants' quarters, royal bedrooms, craft workshops and halls — that make up this mist-covered mountain empire. For hours, we explore the site, shadowed by the 2720m peak of Huayna Picchu. There's a magical, solemn hush, despite the crowds; it is as if this ancient site and its surrounding mountains absorb sound, rendering the world and its intrusions insignificant.

In the afternoon, we head back down to the Inkaterra, just in time for an ancient Andean renewal ceremony in a teahouse on the property. Two native shamans carry out the two-hour ceremony, creating an elaborate offering to Pachamama that includes everything from chocolate, coca leaves and rose petals to a withered black llama foetus.

As dusk falls, we board the luxuriously appointed Hiram Bingham train back up the mountain where we check in to the Belmond Hotel Monasterio, a former monastery renowned for its 16th-century art treasures. After a sumptuous breakfast buffet in the marble cloisters overlooking a central courtyard graced by a 300-year-old cedar tree, there is time for a visit to the local market, filled with locals buying lechon, or suckling pig, and traditional Day of the Dead bread (with spooky dolls' heads) before we fly out.

As our plane takes off over red-tiled roofs, tipping its wing in a farewell to the icy serrated ranges, I whisper my own private plea to Pachamama: get me back to the Andes again — if not in this lifetime, then the next.

Sharon Verghis was a guest of PromPeru, the Peru Export and Tourism Promotion Board.

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