

An Inca adventure

Sarah Gilbert jets to Lima, before setting off
on Peru's Inca trail





Flying into Lima, I saw the city shrouded in sea mist, perched on top of a long coastline of cliffs falling into the Pacific breakers.

Peru's sprawling capital was founded by the Spanish conquistador Francisco Pizarro in 1535, but today it's a multi-layered city, where pre-Colombian and colonial antiquity meet cutting-edge art and a buzzing nightlife across village-like neighborhoods, from upscale Miraflores and San Isidro, to bohemian Barranco.

In the historic center, magnificent buildings showcase the country's rich history. The Plaza de Armas, Lima's central square, is lined with the imposing presidential palace, the fortress-like 15th-century cathedral and mansions adorned with ornately carved wooden balconies.

It's home to fascinating museums, from the internationally renowned Museo Nacional de Antropología y Arqueología to Museo Larco, set in a former mansion built on the site of a pre-Colombian temple, with a fascinating collection of 3,000 years of textiles and ceramics, including a room devoted to erotic archaeological treasures.

And now Lima has another draw: food. Peru's geographical mix added to hundreds of years of immigration has created a diverse cuisine that few other countries match. The city is the country's gastronomic hub and, with mountains and rainforest only an hour's flight away, and the coast on its doorstep, there's a phenomenal range of produce available. At chefs' favorite Surquillo Market, I found everything from Andean superfoods to Amazon super fruits.

Gastón Acurio is the Godfather of new Peruvian cuisine and at his contemporary and colorful flagship, Astrid y Gastón, I sampled his innovative take on traditional dishes: reconstructed ceviche, raw fish 'cooked' in lime juice and served in a tangy sauce known as tiger's milk; the humble causa—cold mashed potato layered with seafood and avocado



PREVIOUS PAGE The majestic Machu Picchu.

ABOVE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT The main square; the courtyard at the Convent of Santo Domingo and The great Cultures Hall at the Larco Museum, all in Lima.

—in gourmet form, and Andean lamb served with paiche, an Amazonian fish.

I was staying in the seaside enclave of Barranco, where restored Belle Époque mansions brim with cafés, restaurants and galleries, including MATE, recently opened by renowned photographer and native Limeño, Mario Testino.

At Hotel B, the city's first luxury boutique hotel, the lofty ceilings and tiled floors have been preserved and complemented with Jordi Puig interiors and walls filled with contemporary Latin American art.

Its restaurant, El Comedor de Hotel B, is overseen by one of the city's most celebrated chefs, Oscar Velarde of La Gloria fame, and I paired dishes such as tuna tartare and melt-in-the-mouth veal cheeks with a green apple-flavored chilcano, a refreshing mix of pisco, Peru's signature spirit, and ginger ale.

Then there's El Celler de Can Roca and El Bulli alumnus Rafael Piqueras, who takes his guests on a culinary journey »

EAT / PLAY / SLEEP

«through Peru at restaurant Maras, and Virgilio Martínez's astounding cuisine at restaurant Central. But it's not all about fine dining.

I had lunch in *Canta Rana*, a small, inexpensive *huarique* where the tables were jammed with locals tucking into hearty portions of seafood *tacu tacu* washed down with jars of *chicha morada* made from purple corn.

Chicha dates back to Incan times and Cusco, the former Inca capital, was my next stop. Built in the shape of a crouching puma with a fortress at its head and a temple at its heart, now it's a mix of impressive ancient stone and Spanish colonial architecture, and an increasing number of chic boutiques and eateries.

The Belmond Palacio Nazarenas, housed in a 16th-century convent-turned-conquistador's mansion, is also an artful mix of ancient and modern. Following a meticulous, four-year restoration involving architects, archaeologists, and local artisans, Inca stonework and cloistered courtyards blend seamlessly with more contemporary comforts, including a butler on hand round-the-clock to run a herbal-scented bath or mix the perfect *pisco sour*.

The Inca believed that Cusco was the 'navel of the earth' and they were the children of the sun. At its peak, it was the richest and most important city in the Americas. Reflecting the city's duality, the Convent of Santo Domingo sits on top of the Inca *Qorikancha*, or Temple of the Sun. It's believed to date from 1200 AD and its walls were once lined with gold. But the arrival of the Spanish changed all that: thousands of indigenous people were killed and their treasure looted.

Cusco's ancient alleyways and cobbled streets were made for exploring on foot and after I'd wandered around the pretty neighborhood of San Blas, where artisans maintain age-old woodcarving traditions, shopping for stylish alpaca knitwear at *Kuna*, and bold silver jewelry at

BELOW, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP Cusco sits high in the Andes at 3,400 meters; Corn makes a regular appearance in sweet and savory Peruvian dishes; Traditionally dressed Peruvian women splashed with beautifully-dyed material.

Ilaria, I dipped into San Pedro, the local market.

Women, with long black plaits tied with colorful ribbon hanging down their backs, gabbled to each other in Quechua, the language of the Inca Empire. Stalls were piled high with corn in every hue—yellow, orange, red, purple—and potatoes in every shape and size. There were tangles of herbs that I'd never seen before, and vivid fruits that I didn't know existed. I was handed slices of nutty-tasting *lucuma* and *chirimoya*, a mix of banana, peach and pineapple. Stranger still were glass jars filled with snakes, gnarled *maca root*—the Andean answer to ginseng—and *dragon's blood*. »

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«At the heart of Cusco is the Plaza de Armas, dominated by an imposing 16th-century cathedral. Inside, an indigenous artist's depiction of The Last Supper has guinea pig on the menu, washed down not with wine but with chicha. While guinea pig remains a local delicacy, Cusco's cuisine is getting ever more cosmopolitan.

At the Belmond Palacio Nazarenas hotel's restaurant Senzo, Michelin-starred chef, Virgilio Martínez only sources ingredients from within a 100-kilometer radius, grows his own organic crops and takes age-old ingredients and gives them a contemporary twist. I feasted on tangy salmon ceviche, purple corn chips, Andean trout and the Incan superfood black quinoa.

Cusco is the gateway to the Sacred Valley, the spiritual and political heartland of the Inca Empire, and the unmissable Machu Picchu. The majestic Lost City of the Incas sits in splendid isolation in a valley almost 2,450 meters above sea level, dominated by the green-clad mountain of

PREVIOUS PAGE Street scenes in Cusco.

ABOVE, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT Take breakfast with views of the stunning Machu Picchu; the luxurious Belmond Hiram Bingham train and the UNESCO World Heritage Site, Machu Picchu.

Wayna Picchu. The citadel was built around 1450 at the height of the empire and abandoned less than 100 years later at the time of the Spanish conquest.

Unlike other Inca sites, Machu Picchu was never found by the Spanish and remained, enveloped in vegetation, until Yale historian and explorer Hiram Bingham rediscovered it in 1911. He had to scramble through dense jungle for several days to reach the ruins. I boarded the luxurious Belmond Hiram Bingham train for the journey to Machu Picchu Pueblo, as spectacular scenery unfurled through the panoramic windows, from snow-capped Andean peaks and fast-flowing rivers to misty cloud forest.

My base was Inkaterra, where tiled-roof *casitas* sit in 12 acres of protected cloud forest flanked by mountains, hummingbirds darted through the trees and stone pathways lead to the world's largest private collection of exquisite orchids, some no bigger than a thumbnail.

Early the next morning, I took one of the fleet of buses that winds upwards towards Machu Picchu, arriving as the sun spread its first rays above the mountaintops. My guide explained that there are still many unexplained theories surrounding it—was it a royal retreat, a living city, a place of worship, or all three? But as I explored its temples and agricultural terraces—still populated by doe-eyed llamas—I marveled at the Inca's architectural prowess.

After a day spent clambering up and down Incan stone steps, I eased my muscles at the spa, sweating it out in the Andean sauna—an *adobe* hut lit by candles and lined with scented eucalyptus leaves—and star-gazing from the hot tub.

Then I relaxed on a sofa in front of a log fire, sipped on a pisco sour and reflected that my own Peruvian trail had taken me from a vibrant metropolis to colonial splendor and ancient citadels via some incredible natural highs. ■