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INKATERRA, PERU



By Nicki Grihault

It's not every day you come close to a spectacled bear, especially not in a hotel garden, even in Peru. But at Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo hotel, I saw this cute-looking rescued "Paddington" bear being rehabilitated for release into the wild. It's just one of many eco-projects that led to Inkaterra scooping the WTTC's Tourism for Tomorrow's Conservation Award this April.

Peruvian Jose Koechlin von Stein started Inkaterra in 1975 and has been using tourism to fund biological research – from ant counting in the Amazon to cloud forest conservation in the Andes – ever since. Giving visitors a taste of Peru's culture, archaeology and nature at its three eco-lux hotels has been part of Inkaterra's DNA before ecotourism was even a concept. Two simpler boutique hotels launched in the last couple of years under more affordable sister brand byInkaterra also offer a similar experience.

Following last year's centenary of Machu Picchu's "discovery" by American explorer Hiram Bingham, and its more recent discovery by foodies, Peru is this year's hot destination and Inkaterra therefore is just the ticket.

Nature first

Most holidays to Peru start off in capital Lima down in the south, where in the absence of an Inkaterra hotel we overnighted in the Costa del Sol Ramada, before taking a short hop with LAN east to Puerto Maldonado, gateway to

the Peruvian Amazon. A 45-minute motor-canoe ride downriver took us to impressive five-star Inkaterra Reserva Amazonica in the Tambopata National Park, where we were welcomed with a cold towel on the riverbank.

"We're not about offering good Wi-Fi or a swimming pool; this experience is about you experiencing real nature," Jesus, one of the guides, says as he explains life in the jungle in one of the 35 traditional Ese'-Eja style cabanas. The eco-friendly cabanas have thatched roofs, cedar-wood floors, salvaged ironwood chairs and palm-leaf lamps in tropical gardens cradled by the jungle; the Tambopata suite even comes with private plunge pool, terrace and outdoor shower.

One of the world's biodiversity hotspots, early morning starts and activities are the norm here. On a rainforest walk a guide points out medicinal plants, insects and small animals such as cute rodent, agouti, while a twilight motor-canoe safari brought a glimpse of an eerie white caiman (crocodile). In between, there was time to chill in a hammock and visit the ENA spa for a refreshing cold-stone massage.

Being punted around the palm-fringed glassy Sandoval Lake, entertained by a squadron of dancing butterflies, with the distant roar – like an airplane – of howler monkeys, was a highlight. So was wobbling after Jesus on fig-splattered swinging wooden bridges on the tree canopy walkway a breathtaking 90ft above this

Clockwise from above left: Anaconda spotting at byInkaterra's Hacienda Concepcion; drink Pisco Sours at byInkaterra El Mapi's blue marble bar; intriguing wildlife; Inkaterra's La Cusora hotel in Cusco; Inkaterra's Machu Picchu Pueblo; Inkaterra Reserva Amazonica



42,000-acre Ecological Reserve, with colourful toucans in the trees.

Mick Jagger and L'Wren Scott may have sipped champagne as some of the first guests in byInkaterra's Hacienda Concepcion jungle lodge last September – in the cute treehouse suite with walkie-talkie butler service – but we sip the famous, refreshing Peruvian cocktail – Pisco Sour – at happy hour. We're joined by a mix of couples and families – 80% of guests are American – in the airy thatched-roof dining pavilion and lounge-bar, with a towering fig tree at its centre. Romantically candlelit at night, I'm in heaven dining on quinoa chowder followed by paca de pescado – steamed fish wrapped in bamboo with Brazil nut sauce.

Waking to a surround sound of insects buzzing like an electric toothbrush and whooping like a car alarm won't suit every client – especially if, like me, their torch alights on a tarantula on a tree trunk on the way back from dinner. But nature walks are always guided and like me, they'll feel cocooned in the wrap-round screen of their cabana.

Bare mountains give way to a clutter of cream-coloured adobe houses with terracotta roofs as the next stage of the trip sees our LAN flight descend into characterful Cusco, once the centre of the Inca empire and now home to Peru's first and only Relais & Chateau hotel, Inkaterra's La Casona.

Set in a 16th-century Spanish colonial mansion,

its 11 spacious suites are also available for private hire, built around a courtyard and sporting Incan artefacts and antiques, handmade furniture and linen, log fires, under-floor heating, standalone bathtubs and Wi-Fi.

A couple of nights slip by easily here. After visiting Inca ruins, we stop off at Awanakancha farm – a community weaving project with comic-looking llamas, alpacas and vicunas – and shop at the silver market at Pisac, reputedly one of the world's best. The hotel is paces from Cusco's central square, Plaza de Armas, stuffed with flowers and women in plaits, bowler hats and brightly-coloured skirts selling trinkets and trailing llamas. Nearby and romantically lit at night, restaurants such as Limo, opened by celebrity chef Coque Ossio last year, offer some of Peru's best dining.

Wonder of the world

It's a three-hour scenic train journey by PeruRail from the snow-capped peaks and cornfields around Cusco to Machu Picchu and up into a cloud forest at 7,000ft.

I have learnt by now that any time is Pisco time in Peru, and at the split-level Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo, we are welcomed with a drink on swidgy sofas by a log fire.

Inkaterra's most expensive hotel, its 85 terracotta-roofed casitas – with eucalyptus beams, log fires, hot water bottles and rainforest showers – are set on a hillside in 12 acres of tranquil gardens. Suites have plunge pools

HOW TO BOOK IT

Journey Latin America offers 10-days from £2,923pp staying at Reserva Amazonica, La Casona and Machu Picchu Pueblo plus all flights and full-board, with excursions to Machu Picchu and the rainforest
Tel 020 8747 8315,
journeylatinamerica.co.uk,
inkaterra.com

HOW TO SELL IT

Time matters: Visit in the dry season April to October, but bear in mind orchids bloom November to March.

Wonder of the world: Book ahead for Machu Picchu where visitor numbers are now limited and six months in advance can be required for an Inca trail trekking permit.

Foodie heaven: Peru's diverse geography, climate and culture makes its cuisine some of South America's best.

Take time: Travel between hotels and altitude adjustment means holidays are best taken slowly.

The right match: Great for honeymooners with bespoke service, gourmet restaurants and privacy, but the Amazon is also a good bet for families, with kids' bug tracking and exploration activities.

in nature and two villas also offer butler service. On a guided walk we explored the world's largest private collection of orchids, some pinhead small, the spectacled bear rescue centre and the tea plantation and herb garden that supplies the hotel as well as Unu Spa, which uses coca leaves in its signature Inka Purification treatment.

The 15th-century Inca city of Machu Picchu is obviously the reason to come here however and a 90-minute bus journey from the village up mountain switchbacks, takes us to one of the new seven wonders of the world.

Rain, as unpredictable as in the Inca's time, can make the myriad steps too slippery to reach the sacred sundial at Machu Picchu's heart – as happened during Jagger's visit – but in our time, vicunas (the wild relative of the llama) were grazing nonchalantly in the sunshine, and over a gourmet picnic, we marvelled at the sophisticated architecture of this ancient site.

The best Pisco cocktails of the trip by far were those downed at byInkaterra's El Mapi with its funky blue-lit marble bar, back down in town and where we headed for a sundowner. This contemporary 48-room hotel, popular since it opened in 2010, is due to add 24 new rooms this summer. As I sipped my last Pisco – this time with mashed strawberries, passion fruit and mint leaves – I reflected on this trip of a lifetime, feeling lucky to have experienced the twin wonders of Inkaterra's approach to tourism and the beauty of Peru. ■