

Peru: the world's most exciting culinary destination

A new lodge set in the Peruvian Andes celebrates local produce and culinary inventiveness. Paul Richardson tucks in

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Inkaterra's Hacienda Urubamba in the Sacred Valley Photo: Alamy

By Paul Richardson

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I am so not hungry, I said to myself, having just arrived in Cuzco where the high altitude (3,400m) was playing havoc with my appetite. Even the smell of someone eating a sandwich by the 17th-century cathedral almost made me cause an indecorous scene in what the Incas called the “bellybutton of the world”.

Not to be hungry in **Peru** is, to put it mildly, a shame. As every foodie knows, this Latin American country is, along with Denmark, leading the world in culinary inventiveness – and its cuisine is madly fashionable. What is less widely known is that Peruvian food is not just about the Lima restaurant scene with its fabulous fusions and experiments, but also the richly varied traditions of the Pacific coastal strip, the Amazon jungle and the Andes.

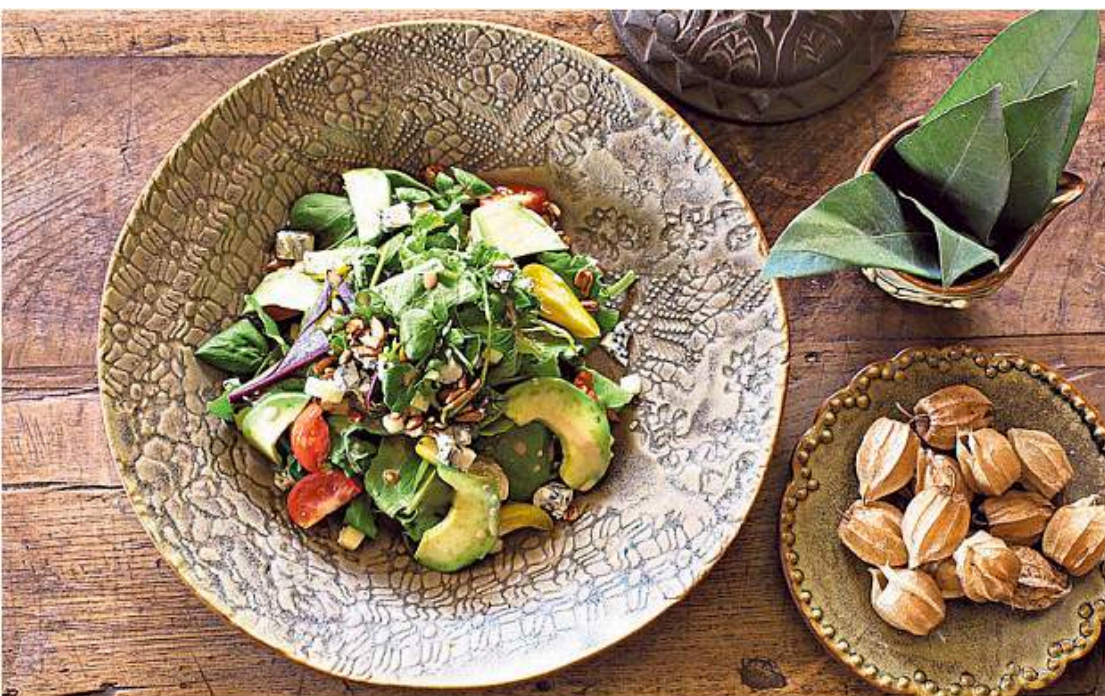


Local delicacies served at Hacienda Urubamba (Alamy)

My first dinner in Cuzco was a cup of tea – coca tea, a time-honoured local remedy for altitude sickness – so next morning I was ravenous. At a roadside stall in Copao they were selling freshly simmered choclo, a kind of maize with a big white waxy grain, and the corn cob I nibbled with a lump of salty cheese made for a deliciously restorative Andean breakfast.

• Peru travel guide

I would be following the classic traveller route towards Ollantaytambo and eventually Machu Picchu along the fast-flowing river Vilcanota – but I'd be staying at the 12-room Hacienda Urubamba, which opened last month and is set to become the benchmark hotel in the area. The latest addition to the Inkaterra stable of high-end properties (see Essentials below), it is located in Huayocari at the heart of the Sacred Valley, known for its Inca sites, fine weather and adventure sports from hiking to river rafting.



Local Peruvian fare (Alamy)

This whole valley had a spiritual significance for the Incas, and I could see why. Its towering crags, covered with a light green fuzz like the baize on a snooker table, are hung with the white skeins of waterfalls and the valley floor is thick with maize plantations. There are fruit trees in abundance and, racked up on terraces, the purplish sprays of another fashionable Andean export: quinoa.

At Awanakancha, a conservation centre and llama ranch, I learnt about the three pillars of local agriculture – maize, quinoa and potatoes (papa). Of the 2,000 varieties of papa in Peru, around 600 are found in the Peruvian Andes and a good few are on show at Awanakancha. They include not just the standard yellow, violet and white varieties, the popular peruanita and the yolk-coloured papa yema, but also the scrunched-up qachuhuacachi (literally “the one that makes the daughter-in-law cry”, because it is so troublesome to peel) and the chuño, a small potato freeze-dried into chalky hardness by the sun and frosts of the high Andes.



Local delicacies served at Hacienda Urubamba (Alamy)

Hacienda Urubamba stands on a slight elevation at the side of the valley. With its pitched, tiled roof and proud dimensions, it mimics the aspect of a colonial hacienda – but there the similarity ends. Its airy public spaces have floor-to-ceiling windows, making the most of some incredible mountain views. My room had high, beamed ceilings and terracotta floor tiles warmed by underfloor heating. I was the first guest ever to have stayed there, and the hacienda still smelt of dust and paint.

To a soundtrack of offstage hammer-blows, I sat at a hastily laid table before a huge stone fireplace while manager Joaquín Escudero told me about local produce used in the kitchen: alpaca steaks, river trout, lamb, and cuy (guinea pig) bred at Inkaterra's organic homestead near Machu Picchu – one of six supplying this and the group's other hotels. Guests are welcomed with a chicha morada – a non-alcoholic drink made from purple corn, served refreshingly cold – while the bar makes much of pisco sour (the famous brandy cocktail) and artisan Peruvian beers made from quinoa, wheat and maize.

The beating heart of the hacienda is its chacra, or vegetable garden. On tours, visitors are initiated into agricultural practices with millennia of history behind them, such as the Inca “foot plough” or chakitaqlla, still widely used in the Sacred Valley.



Peruvian girls in national dress overlook Machu Picchu (Alamy)

In the company of José Luis Lavilla, one of Inkaterra's full-time ecological guides, I roamed the 14-acre grounds. Two llamas grazed on the lawns, idle now but potentially to be used for rides along the valley. The extensive chacra is a rich sampler of local crops. There are fields of potatoes in white and violet flower, and waving fronds of quinoa. Among the vegetables are sachatamate (the elongated “tree tomato”) and rocoto (a hot red pepper, stuffed with meat in one of Cuzco's signature dishes).

“Aquí crece to do [everything grows here],” said José Luis. From him I learnt about the archaic ritual dishes still eaten on high days and holidays, such as chiriuchu (a mighty stew of maize, guinea pig and mixed meats) and watia, in which potatoes, beans and meat are cooked in an earth pit. Reverence for the natural world permeates the traditions of the Andes: for example, it is still common in this sierra to blow steam off your food in the direction of the peaks where the apus (mountain spirits) live.

Next morning we set off on a trek along the valley, gazing down from a high ridge towards the new hotel in its glorious setting. This otherwise timeless landscape is about to change, however. Investors from Chile, Europe and the United States are beginning to snap up land – and they are not just here for the clear air and the bucolic views. For over the crest of the valley lies Chinchero, which will shortly have its own international airport. Be sure to see this extraordinary region now, before the developers move in.



Local delicacies served at Hacienda Urubamba (Alamy)

Getting there

There are no direct flights from Britain to Peru. Iberia (020 3684 3774; iberia.com) flies daily to Lima from London via Madrid. KLM (020 7660 0293; klm.com) flies daily to Lima via Amsterdam from London and a range of other UK regional airports.

Packages

Miraviva (020 7186 1111; miravivatravel.com) offers a 10-day Andean Discovery luxury package to Lima, the Sacred Valley, Machu Picchu and Cuzco. It costs from £3,695 per person, based on two sharing. The price includes international and domestic flights, accommodation, Hiram Bingham train, private transfers and tours.

Where to stay

Hacienda Urubamba (0800 458 7506; inkaterra.com) is the latest boutique hotel owned by Inkaterra. A three-day, two-night stay in a superior double costs \$540 (£360). Other properties include Machu Picchu Pueblo eco-lodge (doubles from £215) and La Casona in Cuzco (doubles from £325).