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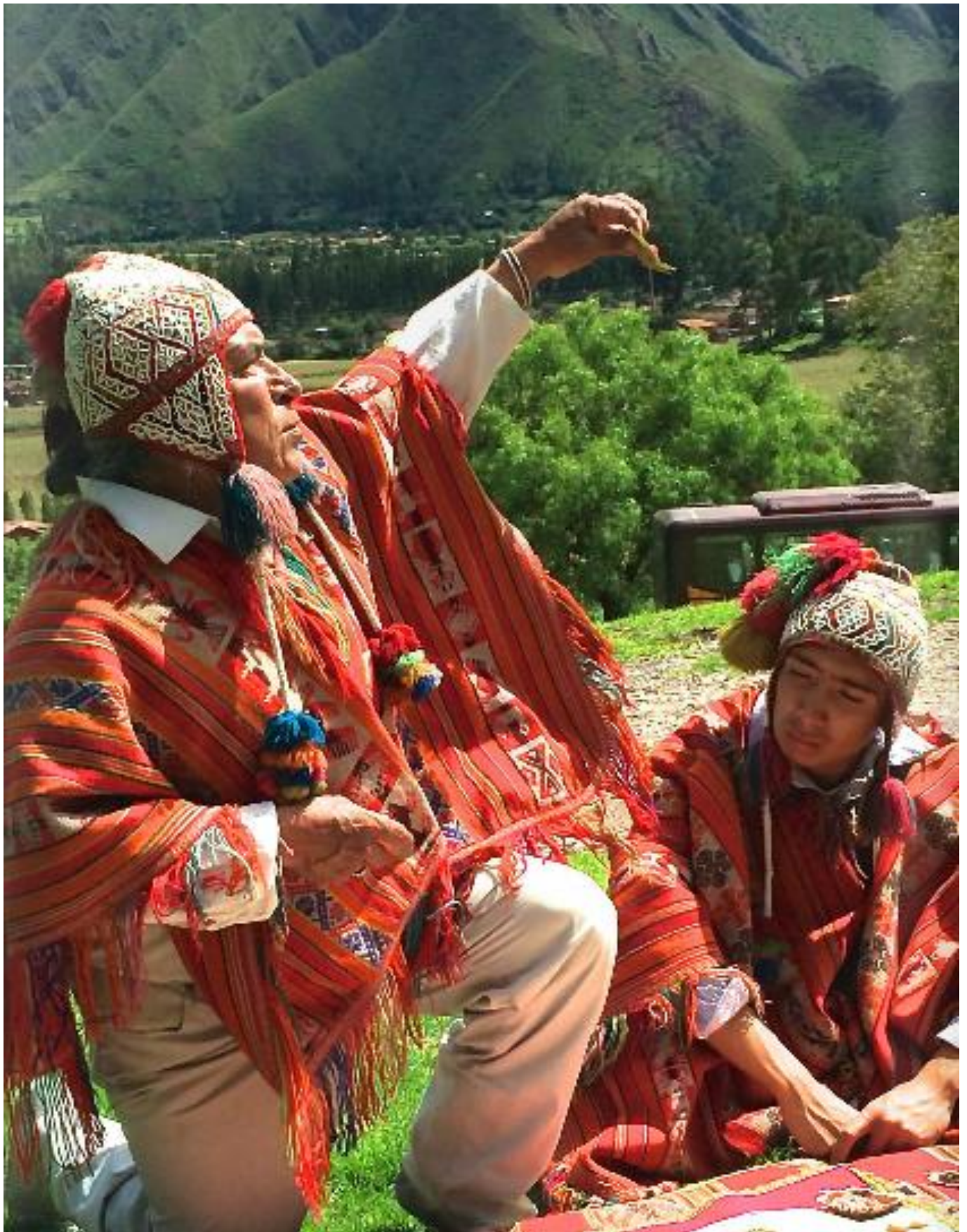
FLOATING THROUGH EUROPE

A FRESH LOOK AT LEXINGTON, KENTUCKY

ADVENTURE IN PERU

LIVERPOOL BEYOND THE BEATLES

POSTCARDS FROM YUCATAN



FINDING A SILVER LINING IN PERU

STORY AND PHOTOS BY MARIBETH MELLIN



Travel is my passion. Like all great loves, it messes with my mind and heart at times. But *vale la pena*, as we say in Spanish. It's definitely worth the effort.

Take my recent weeklong Peruvian misadventure. The ambitious itinerary included a writer's conference and a dash through Lima, Machu Picchu, Cusco and the Amazon, all places I'd grown to love while writing the *Traveler's Peru Companion* in the 1990s.

My must-do list included meditating with alpacas on a hilltop overlooking Machu Picchu and reveling in the Am-

azon's spooky gloom. An extra bag was on hand for alpaca sweaters, woven textiles and precious folk art. My taste buds tingled at the thought of Peru's endless versions of *ceviche*, the unique flavor of aji chilies and delicate pink *trucha* (trout) from Andean streams—but not for soy, the cooked version of Peru's kitten-sized, cuddly *guinea pigs*.

Catastrophe struck two days into the trip, however, during my one precious night at the lovely, historic Inkatarra Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel. Any thought of food made me woozy; my body refused to carry on. Travel tummy seemed the obvious culprit, but I later learned I'd picked up two stubborn bac-

terial infections in California that decided to emerge most inconveniently. They could have destroyed everything, but serendipitous moments created heart-felt memories that left me longing to return to Peru ASAP.

A Promising Beginning

The week's highlights began with a chance sighting of folk dancers parading in front of the cathedral overshadowing Lima's Plaza de Armas. Children perched on their dads' shoulders and

Top: Cusco's narrow streets are lined with intriguing shops. **Opposite:** Shaman in the Sacred Valley.

tiny grandmothers squeezed to the front of the crowd to watch elaborately costumed teenage dancers preen and parade around the square, occasionally glancing at their phones like teens everywhere.

The following morning, dawn tinted clouds pink and lavender as we flew toward the Andes and Cusco, 11,000 feet above sea level. Vans awaited our group

for the mesmerizing drive past humble villages beneath velvet green mountains in the fertile, spiritual Sacred Valley. During a brief stop at the handsome new Inkaterra Hacienda Urubamba, a shaman blessed our journey through holy Inca lands. Wine, delicate ceviche and camera-worthy views of foamy rivers slicing mountain peaks kept us entertained on a posh Inca Rail train ride to Machu Picchu.

Misfortune Strikes

We arrived too late for a further expedition up another mountain trail to the archeological site, but found plenty to admire within the nature reserve at the Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel, where I'd stayed on my first expedition. After searching in vain for the rare cock-of-the-rock (Peru's national bird) on a short nature hike followed by a dinner



of delicate, delicious trucha, I prepared for a morning trek among pyramids and alpacas as a gentle rain whispered through giant ferns outside my window.

Two hours later, I felt a fiesta kick into gear in my gut. Pure misery settled in for an extended stay as I shivered and shuffled between bed and bath, convinced I could banish all intruders by morning. But the partygoers held firm,

dancing a throbbing beat from my toes to my skull.

I finally called the doctor with only two hours left in my Machu Picchu stay. After receiving a shot, a swig of some miracle potion and enough pills to kill Ebola, I fought self-pity while stumbling down the hotel's verdant paths to another elegant Inca Rail train for the trip back to Cusco.



Above: Courtyard at Cusco's Palacio del Inka hotel **Left:** Rural farm in the Sacred Valley. **Below:** Dancers at Lima's Plaza de Armas.





Top: Inca fountain at CERO Y Plaza de Armas.
Opposite middle: Trout carpacdo at Inkaterre
Madru Pichu Pueblo Hotel. Opposite bottom:
Carver and painter Maestro Maximo at his
Cusco shop.

Good Fortune Takes Charge

I must have looked beyond pitiful as I slunk into the grand lobby at Cusco's Palacio Del Inka hotel that night. I vaguely remember Roger, the kind concierge who led me through an enormous formal suite to a cloud-soft bed. As I tried to sleep, visions of the next morning's planned flight and boat ride to the Amazon brought on the vapors, though that spooky old river is one of my favorite places on the planet. The promise of two days in Cusco, navel of the Inca world, tempered disappointment as I cancelled all further excursions.

Determined to enjoy Cusco—Peru's best shopping and cultural center—I wandered away from the hotel in mid-afternoon for a short walk to the main Plaza de Armas. After hiking up a couple of steep streets I collapsed on a park bench, studied my map and wondered how I could possibly have missed my destination. The next day I realized I'd been in the plaza all along, but was too dazed and exhausted to notice the baroque cathedral overlooking the plaza's multi-tiered fountain topped with a statue of

an Inca warrior. Thoroughly defeated, I followed a circuitous downhill route until spotting the hotel's cheery blue and white facade.



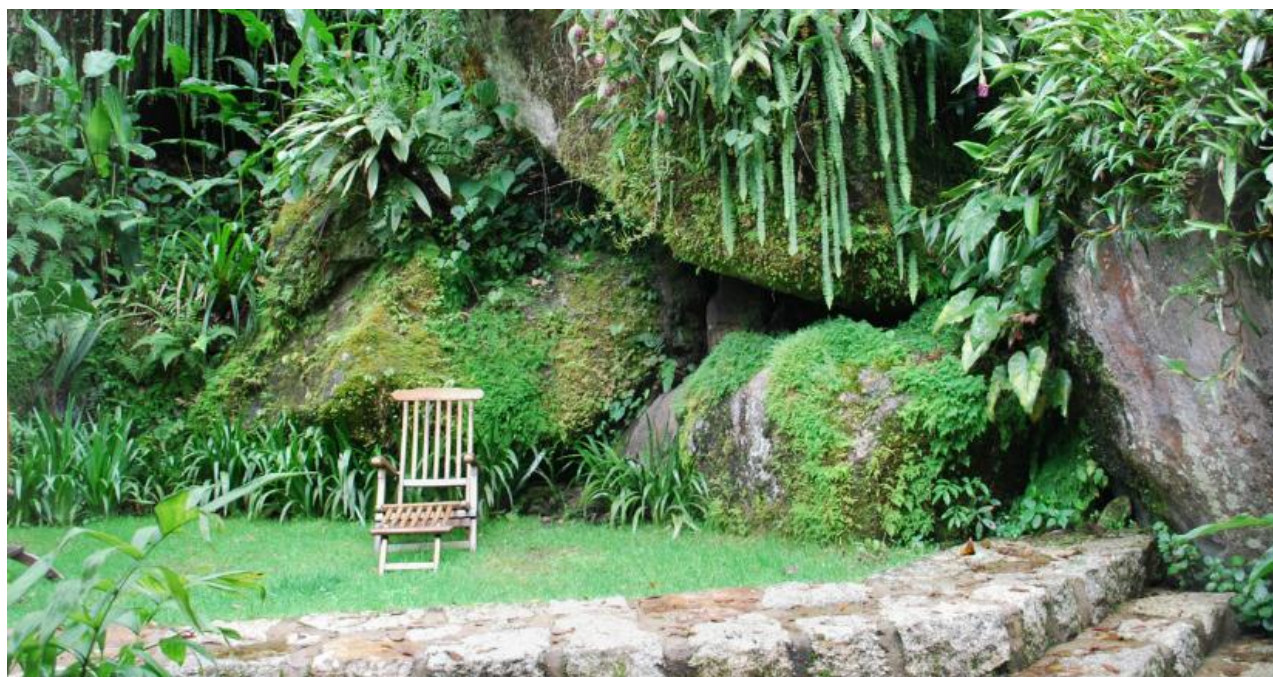
The following morning brought rain and gloomy clouds over distant mountain peaks, but nothing could destroy my final 24 hours in Peru. After chugging the doctor's mysterious brew and pills, I boldly ventured forth and hailed a cab to San Blas, an artsy neighborhood on a hill above by the Plaza de Armas. In a spirited, energetic shopping frenzy, I managed to hand over hundreds of soles in a mere two hours. My usual tendency

to dither over purchases evaporated as I darted through narrow doorways into treasure-box shops where owners and clerks were as fascinating as their wares. I did manage to resist the gorgeous alpaca sweaters and capes displayed in chic boutiques. Instead, I found two silky soft rose and violet scarves at Pure Alpaca, which carries alpaca weavings from an Andean women's collective.

Next came retablos, colorful house-shaped boxes holding tiny dioramas. Several friends already have nativity retablos from my last trip. They're always in high demand. One multi-level shop packed with collector-quality folk art carried wildly intricate two-foot tall versions worth thousands of dollars. Mine came from a wizened, hard-bargaining lady in a souvenir shop.

Fanciful ceramic bulls, called toritos de Pucará, also came from modest shops. These caramel-colored figurines perch on rooftops all around the Andes bring good fortune, prosperity and fertility to households. They're the perfect gift for young friends in starter houses. I had stricter requirements for replacing my





View from my room at the Inkaterra Machu Picchu Hotel.

original torito, which had faced my office from the garden until cats, possums and raccoons knocked it over once too often. The fancier version, with a ladder leading to heaven, a rooster (which might keep me alert) and a teensy pot to hold my riches, now watches over my desk from a ceiling-high shelf.

San Blas looked absolutely magical that evening with the lingering sunlight illuminating terra cotta roofs tumbling down Andean mountainsides. One memory kept pushing me forward, past the desire to enter a cozy cafe for wine and ceviche. On my first visit to Cusco, 15 years past, I climbed the hills of San Blas early one morning, testing my altitude adjustment. Spotting an open door, I watched a serious man studiously carving picture frames. Enchanted, I asked him to make one for me and watched as he sculpted rows of perfect half-moons in cedar before fitting a rectangle together. That simple frame now hangs in my living room as a work of art on its own. There's no need to fill it with a painting or photo; it represents precious memories of Peru.

I wanted to stumble upon that workshop once again, but kept getting distracted. I spotted a cloth painting hanging outside a shop that looked almost exactly like one I'd purchased in the steamy Amazonian port city of Iquitos

in years past. The motif was immediately recognizable as the work of indigenous Shipibo women from remote Amazonian villages who draw sophisticated, intricate geometric patterns inspired by cosmological visions on pottery and cloth. Tall piles of textiles covered a backroom table in this small Cusco shop. I found their very presence puzzling, until the proprietor explained that her husband traveled the Amazon, collecting Shipibo art to help support the tribe's traditions. Choosing just one piece from the wealth of designs was the hardest decision of my day.

Streetlights glistened against the sapphire sky as I cautiously minced my way down slippery, skeletal sidewalks toward the Plaza de Armas. Glancing side to side, I nearly caused a pedestrian pileup when I spotted a shop's windows and walls filled with paintings of virgins and saints in gilded frames. Though the crowded space was nothing like the dusty workshop of the past, the frames were the exact same design. I explained my quest to a woman brushing gold paint on wooden trim as I burrowed through stacks to find perfect, unadorned copies of my Peruvian totem.

As we chatted, a man I assumed was her husband entered quietly and stood to the side while I haltingly described my memory. Translated loosely, she said

"You mean Maestro Maximo!" while beaming sideways. I glanced over and felt no sense of recognition, though his gentle expression fit my recollection. His wife talked of his prominence in Cusco's art scene and his many students as he stood silently by, until I asked if I could take his photo. I started to hand him one of my simple frames, but he studied the religious paintings until he found a favorite Madonna and child. As we laughed and chatted I realized it didn't matter if Maximo was the man I remembered. I'd found a talented, warm-hearted artist whose simple frames would inspire dreams of my next Peruvian odyssey. ■

IF YOU GO

Inkaterra promotes sustainable tourism with hotels, guides and a dedication to preserving Peruvian nature and culture. The company's itineraries hit all the major highlights and its hotels are among the country's finest. <http://www.inkaterra.com>

Inca Rail offers luxurious first-class train transport to Machu Picchu. incarail.com

For information about travel in Peru check out www.peru.travel/en-us/

Caution: If you're sick, try to stay away from antibiotics or keep the dosage low. In my case, they exacerbated the infections I'd carried from the States and helped them linger for many months.