



COVER FEATURE: TRAVEL EDITION 2016: EXOTIC

PERU AND ECUADOR

FROM GREAT HEIGHTS TO SEASIDE CLIFFS



TRAVELERS VIEW THE INCA RUINS AT THE MACHU PICCHU ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE, PERU. ©
BLAINE HARRINGTON III

By Larry Olmsted

There is good reason why the postcard-perfect ruins of Machu Picchu make every travel “Bucket List,” and to see them in person inevitably brings the shock and awe of “how did they do that?” The ruins are an entire city, not a monument, built on the most precipitous spot imaginable, a jagged shark tooth peak sticking high into the air above the valley all that stone was somehow brought up from. But as incredible as the site is, there is a lot more to a trip to Machu Picchu than just Machu Picchu, which for most visitors remains a half-day field trip from the gateway town of Aguas Calientes below.

In recent years the exploration opportunities around Aguas Calientes have boomed, and adventure-centric lodges like Inkaterra have added many guided regional excursions. This is about the only place on earth you can still see the Spectacled Bear, once common in the Andes, now nearly extinct and in a protected sanctuary nearby. Hikes in the lush Mandor Valley are like something out of Jurassic Park, with orchids, waterfalls and rare speckle-faced parrots. A trek up little-visited Putukusi offers a new vantage point to see the fabled ruins from directly across the valley, while a hike up even higher Wayna Picchu lets you look directly down on the Lost City, a view few enjoy.

While the Andes are the world’s second highest mountain range and full of hiking options, most visitors to the Galapagos Islands of Ecuador spend the majority of their time on boats, the best way to get around the archipelago and see a lot of the aquatic wildlife. But this makes time ashore extra valuable, and a great place to stretch your legs is the Galapaguera de Cerro Colorado reserve on San Cristobal Island. The giant San Cristobal tortoise is one of 11 species endemic to the Galapagos, and threatened with extinction, which is why it’s worth visiting this protected preserve and strolling the kilometer long nature path to see them. Turtles are raised here from eggs, and there is also a breeding center and laboratory.

It was Darwin who put the islands on the world tourism map as a must-visit for its incredible and diverse ecosystem, and he was immortalized through Darwin Bay on Genovesa Island, a Galapagos highlight. The horseshoe island is a collapsed volcano, so the towering sea cliffs that ring the bay overlook salt water on both sides. Nicknamed Bird Island for its incredible avian diversity, visitors ascend Prince Phillip's Steps, a steep rock path up the cliffs, which passes through an active seabird colony, and while the cliffs are less than a hundred feet high, the vantage point from the top is among the most dramatic in a destination filled with wonder at every turn.

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