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ARCHAEOLOGICAL EROTICISMS AND GUINEA PIG RAGU ON A WHISTLE-STOP TOUR OF PERU

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TIM LOTT GOES ON AN ECO-FRIENDLY, ONCE IN A LIFETIME TRIP TO PERU...



— Tim Lott Machu Picchu

It is absolutely de rigueur nowadays for any travel company or hotel to flaunt its green credentials – although this may often not amount to any more than asking you to put up with wet or dirty towels for a few nights to save them the cost of laundering them.

Truth is, the travel industry, particularly at the luxury end, is inherently wasteful – and that’s before you add in the carbon footprint of any air travel that may be involved.

However, if this is the sort of thing that tweaks your conscience – and it should – there are a good number of eco-travel companies that live up to the name. Probably foremost, however, and one of the first, is [Inkaterra](#).

Based in Peru, Inkaterra was set up in 1975 with the sole purpose of promoting ecological awareness and actively campaigning for and participating in biodiversity projects. Uniquely for a hotel chain (so far as I am aware) profits provide the sole funding for their conservation projects.

Of course, being ecologically sensitive as a tourist no longer means one has to put on a metaphorical hair shirt. Or so I was promised when I was offered the chance to do a tour of Inkaterra’s properties in Peru over a whistle-stop, six-night tour taking in Lima, The Sacred Valley of the Incas, Machu Picchu, Cusco and the Amazonian rainforest. It was going to be a rush, that was for sure, but there was plenty to see in between the almost non-stop run of train, plane and bus journeys.

The first stop, Lima, is never a great tourist draw, but I stopped off at one of the best museums I’ve ever visited, the Larco Museum, the largest private collection of pre-Columbian art pieces in the Americas.

As it happened, I arrived on the Day of the Dead, so one could see families strewing picnic gear across cemeteries all over the city. It was appropriate because much of the collection is funerary artifacts, which are remarkable because the lack of rainfall on the coasts of Peru means they are preserved in astonishing condition – textiles and pottery nearly 3,000 years old look like they have just been ordered from the local store.

The Peruvians, like many ancient cultures, were obsessed with the dead, and the three worlds of birds (the heavens), cats (the earth) and snakes (the underworld) are continually represented in various forms. One of the centrepieces is a funerary mummy, from the 8th century AD, containing a four or five-year-old infant, which has the skin of someone who might have expired the day before.

Their collection of erotic grave goods – including some highly perverse examples that would not be out of place on YouPorn – is proof that there is nothing novel about our modern obsession with sex and death.



The Sacred Valley of the Incas – 1,000km away and our next stop – revealed [Inkaterra's newest hotel](#), the Inkaterra Hacienda Urubamba, set in the heart of an ecological farm, where they grow goods for the superb restaurant.

Here I had [my first taste of guinea pig](#), albeit in a ragù sauce. It was pretty good, but not as good as their version of Lomo Saltado, practically the Peruvian equivalent of the Sunday Roast – essentially beef sautéed with onions, tomatoes and peppers. The hotel itself had that atmosphere of newness that can mar a hotel – the unlovely cabanas in the grounds were less slick than the main building – but it remains a remarkable setting.

I took a bus, then a train to Aguas Calientes, where I would set off to Machu Picchu, one of the world's biggest tourist attractions, at 4.30am the following morning.

The [Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel](#) here, at this small, touristy town is a series of cottages snuggled up against the train station, cosy and characterful, and the café is actually set in between and above train tracks. They also keep a Peruvian bespectacled bear – Paddington's breed – in the grounds, who seems to not mind you ogling him.

The journey to Machu Picchu was everything it was hyped as – I will not add to the thousands of descriptions of the majesty of this historic site – except to say that it was less crowded than I expected, and that the story of its discovery, by the American Hiram Bingham in 1911, is almost as remarkable as the place itself – he almost literally stumbled upon a family whose son used the 15th-century Inca settlement as his personal playground.

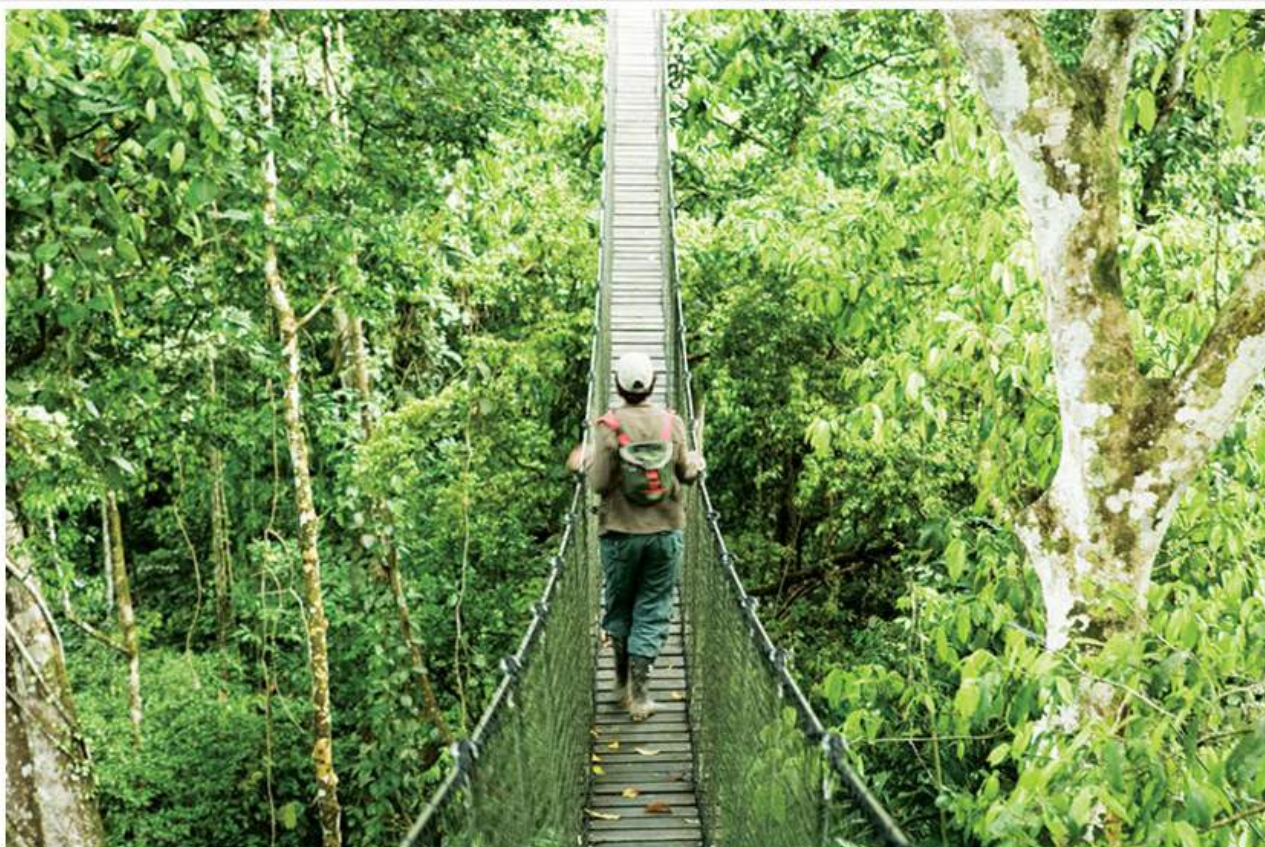
The train journey to and from Aguas Calientes was almost more enjoyable than MP itself – swirling as it did in between vast mountains. I was served a three-course meal and champagne, which I could sip from an open – if narrow – balcony on the side of the train.

We then drove up to Cusco, at 3,399m above sea level, where we were warned to beware of altitude sickness, but I felt fit as a fiddle, and positively skipped around this most picturesque of all Peruvian towns; all squares, cathedral and winding alleyways. If you are a fan of alpaca, this is the place for you, since pretty much every other shop sells it in one form or another (the rest are either souvenir shops, travel agents or restaurants).



We made it to the rainforest and to the first Inkaterra property – opened in 1975. A boat delivered us along a tributary of the Amazon to a canopied walkway that led to an elegant wooden structure around which were designed dozens of beautiful, tent-like lodges, open-sided rooms full of light and air (the ultimate dwelling being a single small structure built into the top of a tree alone in the jungle itself).

Barely had we touched down, when we took a cruise along the river to see some wildlife – Amazon caimans mainly, but also capybara, and two possums cuddled up in a roof. A sloth was also allegedly spotted up a tree, but all I could see was something that looked like a bird's nest (they tend to curl up very small). There were more species of ant, we were told, on a typical single tree, than in the whole of the British Isles.



The next morning we stopped at another [Inkaterra](#) property, where we rowed on a lake to see howler monkeys and vultures – and then it was back to the airport for a 24-hour journey home. It's a wonderful tour, but over far too quickly – if you follow this itinerary, extend it by three days at least, and it will be nigh on perfect.

Cox & Kings offers a tailor-made ten-day/eight-night Inkaterra holiday to Peru from £2,795pp twin share, including flights, transfers, rail tickets and excursions to Machu Picchu.

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