

Amazon, Andes and Aguas Calientes: How to see the best of Peru while immersed in its culture and natural wonders

- Eco-friendly Inkaterra lodges are based in different corners of Peru, allowing guests to be immersed in its culture
- They are located near famous sites such as Machu Picchu and the Amazon forest giving travellers great access
- All of them have nature trails and invest heavily in conservation, which helps to protect biodiversity for the future

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PUBLISHED: 08:32 GMT, 28 February 2016 | **UPDATED:** 10:27 GMT, 3 March 2016

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I arrived in Lima during the Day of the Dead. El Día de los Difuntos in these parts. Cemeteries were filled with mourners, lunching with the departed and leaving behind flowers and keep-sakes. This is an ancient and gothic city demonstarting a colourful celebration for death as much as it does for life.

There is a chromatic mix of indigenous and colonial influence. You still see those who dress and promote the traditional hand-woven ponchos and chullo hats. It's impossible however not to notice the doleful fashion of America (Nike polos and knock-off 501's) creeping in.

I visited the Larco Museum which has the largest collection of pre-Colombian art pieces in the world, as well as a graphic ceramic exhibition of Inca-bonking and sex in the underworld. I'm able to gain a better understanding of when and where the Incas existed, spread across what is now Peru, Ecuador, Colombia, Chile, Bolivia and Argentina, between 1438 and 1533.



David Constable stands over the Inca ruins at Machu Picchu, above, where only 2,500 people are allowed to visit each day. Travellers are advised to plan ahead if they want to visit the site

Google takes incredible 360 degree view of Machu Picchu

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The view over Ollantaytambo, a town in the Sacred Valley. Visitors can reach Machu Picchu by train from here and it's one of the easiest ways to get there

It's about a 50 minute flight from Lima to Cusco, followed by a bumpy incline drive up to 2,766 metres. Between Cusco and Ollantaytambo is the recently opened Inkaterra Hacienda Urubamba.

The Inkaterra lodge is located above the cornfields and flower gardens of the Sacred Valley. Here is one of Inkaterra's finest restaurants. Food is a mix of native Peruvian ingredients (quinoa, kiwicha and local chilli's) with classic techniques. And ingredients don't get more authentic than guinea pig.

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Guinea pig is a national obsession. It should be on the flag. They are advertised on large colourful boards outside of restaurants and old ladies in the street dress them up in miniature clothing, as if they'd spent the afternoon at Build A Bear. As a dish, what can I say... it's small and meaty and bony. The skin is crispy and delicious.

After dinner there's a walking excursion up and over the mountains that encompass the Sacred Valley. Oil-burner lamps are handed out and we listen to stories of Pachamama and ghost tales about Supay, ruler of the Incan underworld.



A lodge at Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel, an award-winning eco-hotel in Machu Picchu Village. It's seconds from the train station



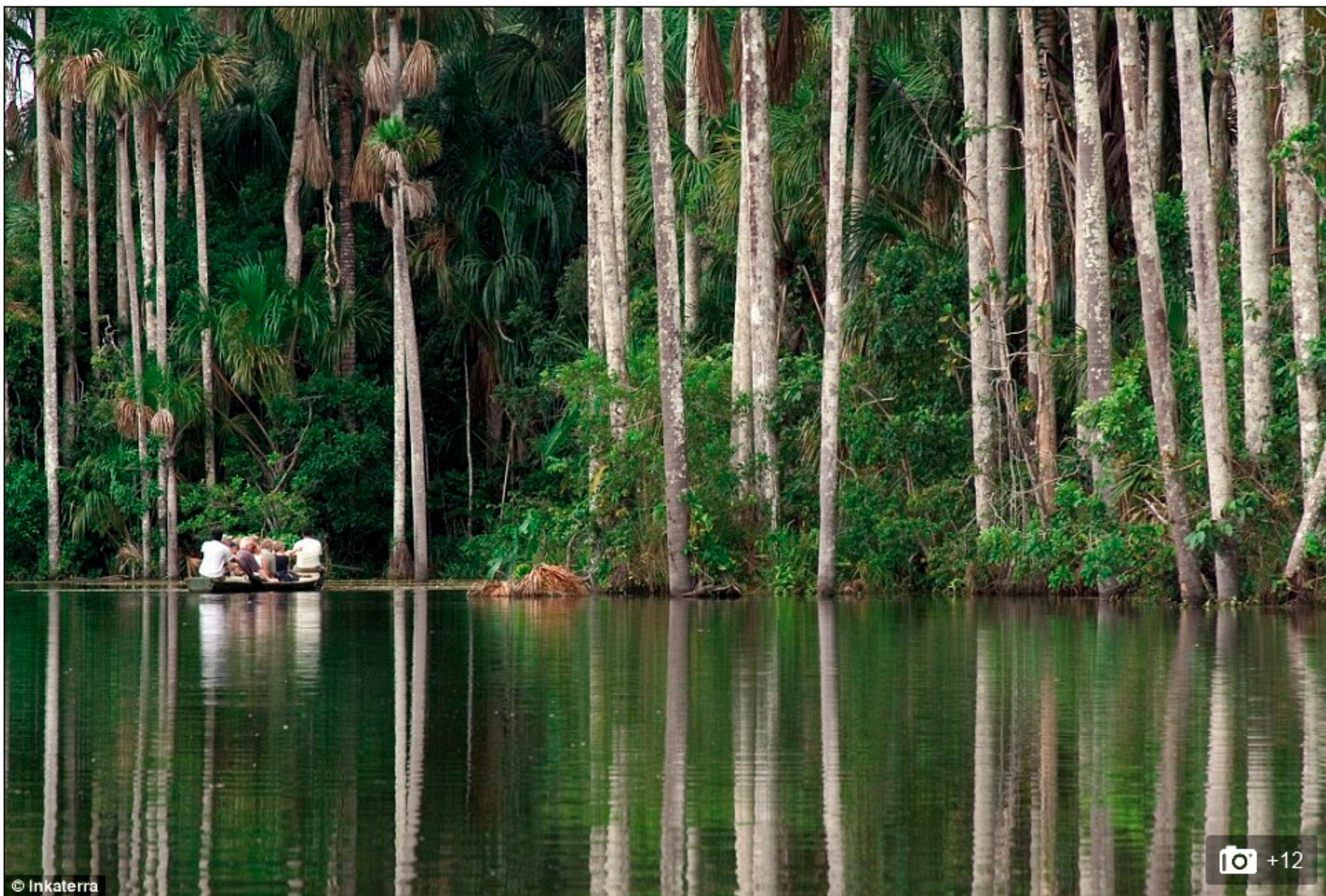
Inside a bedroom at Inkaterra La Casona, Cusco. It's filled with colonial furniture and native textiles - a part of the investment in local trade

PeruRail and Inca Rail run from Cusco to Machu Picchu. I boarded at Ollantaytambo for the remaining two hours of the journey. The railway was created to connect Cusco to La Convencion in the jungle. Today, the train remains the only way to reach the citadel, other than by helicopter – which you and I can't afford.

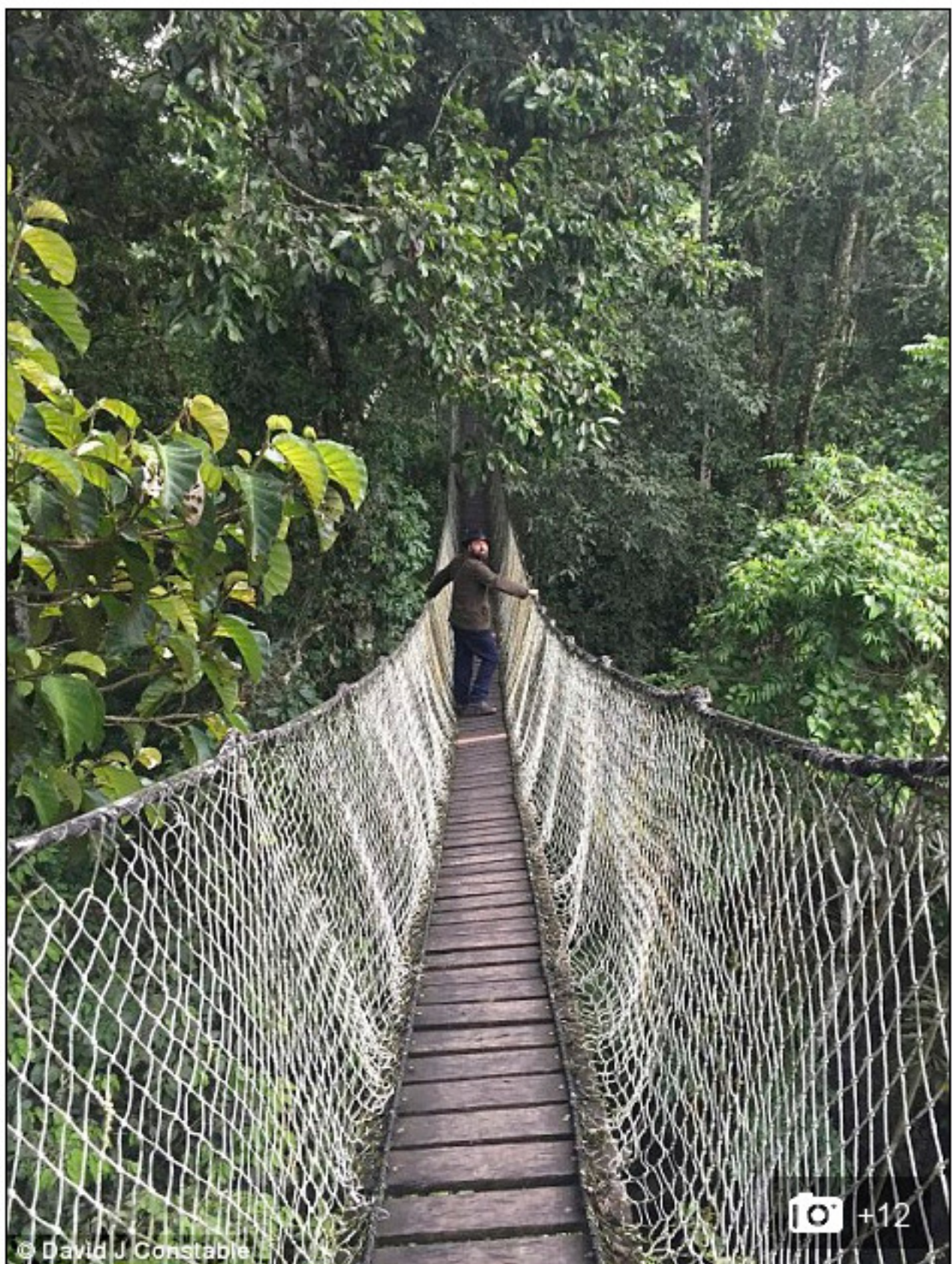
The Belmond Hiram Bingham train, with its wood panelling, degustation menu and panoramic vista of the decent into Aguas Calientes, is complete luxury. Designed as a copy of the Orient Express, and brought to Peru from Singapore, it's not cheap. It is however, the most comfortable way to reach Machu Picchu.

Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel is located seconds from the train station. It borders the jungle and has the appearance of a hidden Andean village.

As with all of the Inkaterra properties, there is an extensive list of nature walks and field excursions. Unique to this location is a garden trail with 372 native orchid species. According to the American Orchid Society, it is the world's largest native orchid collection found in a natural habitat. It's here where I see the elusive cock-of-the-rock national bird and a black spectacled bear, a true Paddington.



Lago Sandoval, above, is a jungle river in the Amazon. It's one of the excursions available from Inkaterra



David enjoys a trek across the canopy walk, a 29 metre high connection of hanging bridges, built across 344 metres of the jungle reserve

A maximum of 2,500 people per day are allowed into Machu Picchu, so plan your day early to ensure entry. There is a larger debate about tourist capacity, and recently, access has been cut because of weather. With the natural geography and climate of the rainforest, landslides and flooding are inherent.

Cusco is a crumbly Spanish city. It remains the spiritual heart of the Inca Empire and has always been an important colonial centre. There is an evident mix of Incan architecture and Andean Baroque, but it's the scatter of grand Catholic symbolism that overwhelms.

The Templo de la Compañía de Jesús; Iglesia de San Pedro; and the ornate Santo Domingo Church, which stands on the site of the Inca Palace of Viracocha, are all Gothic-Renaissance temples built to demonstrate the dominance of Christianity.

In the evenings local bands gather in the squares. Flutes, whistles, panpipes and drums sound out. These jolly jamborees continue well into the night. Such a racket goes on in the Plaza Nazarenas, in front of Inkaterra La Casona, and right outside of my window (on the one evening I'm feeling the sickness of being at 11,200 feet), that it sets off several car alarms.



Capybara, the largest rodent in the world, is native to south America. It's one of the many animals that can be spotted in the forests

Trust helps save Amazon rainforests



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The wildlife in the Amazonian forest is extremely diverse. Above, Coco the Andean bear sits and munches on a banana leaf. Aside from bears, there are also pumas and jaguars, and bloodthirsty mosquitoes

The La Casona property is a 16th century manor house. There is a small courtyard and 11 suites, each with colonial furniture and native textiles. Along with Inkaterra Hacienda Urubamba, Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel and Inkaterra Hacienda Concepcion, La Casona has been added to the collection of 'National Geographic Unique Lodges of the World'. Service here is warm and graceful. The coca tea is excellent.

Of all the Inkaterra locations, Hacienda Concepcion and Reserva Amazónica are the most difficult to reach.


You can get to the Amazon by taking a flight from Cusco to Puerto Maldonado. You arrive on a thin airstrip, in the rain, which is no more than you can expect in the rainforest. Here it gains around 260 metres of rainfall a year. It's a short bus ride to the Madre de Dios River, then a chugger boat to the original Inkaterra lodge, the Reserva Amazónica.

From the boat you can see across to the riverbank and into the jungle. My guide spots a black cayman from 80 metres. A wild peccary pig feeds on berry bushes and a capybara sinks into the muddy water. Holwer monkeys nap in the trees.



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Cusco remains the spiritual heart of the Inca Empire and has always been an important colonial centre. There is an evident mix of Incan architecture and Andean Baroque, but it's the scatter of grand Catholic symbolism that overwhelms



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Pre-Columbian masks and artifacts on display in the Larco Herrera Museum in Lima, where David began his journey and learnt about the history of the Inca people

There are 1,300 species of butterfly in the Peruvian Amazon and 100 species of bats, including three species of blood drinking bats. There are also pumas and jaguars, and a gazillion bloodthirsty mosquitoes, all of who found my neck and legs.

I'm given the safety brief for the canopy walk, a 29 metre high connection of several hanging bridges, built across 344 metres of the jungle reserve. Views from the top display the great expanse of primeval forest and fauna.

Through the work and effort of José Koechlin and Inkaterra Asociación, guests are granted access to all corners of Peru, even above ground in the Amazon jungle. The promotion of eco-tourism however is difficult. You're measured on your failures and now more than ever, the 'eco' labelling of tourism is flung about by many who don't really understand what it means.

All Inkaterra tourism and hospitality earnings are used to fund research for the conservation of Peru and for cultural research, in order to manage and protect the biodiversity of Peru's Andes and Amazon Rainforest.