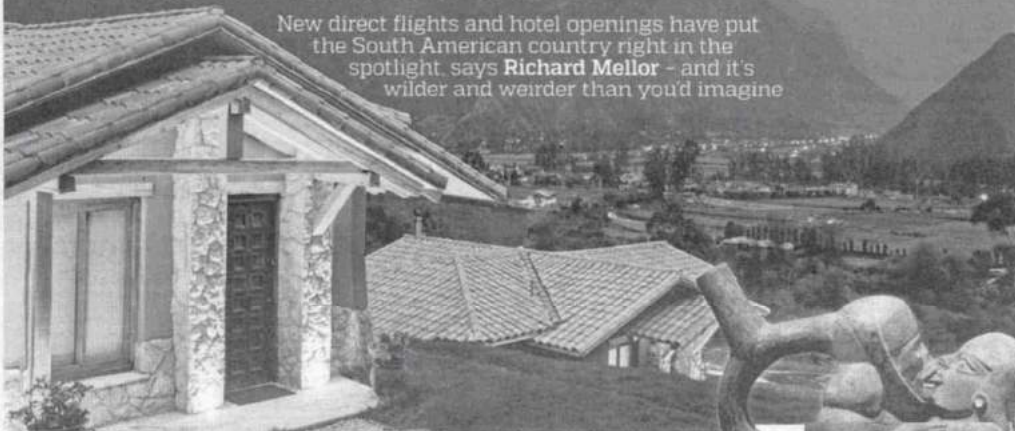


PERU

with a view

PERU
SPECIAL

New direct flights and hotel openings have put the South American country right in the spotlight says **Richard Mellor** - and it's wilder and weirder than you'd imagine



ASK someone, Family Fortunes-style, about Peru and 'Machu Picchu' will probably be their first response. Other possible answers are 'pisco sour', 'Paddington Bear' and 'ceviche'. But this month British Airways launches a new direct flight between London and Lima (prices starting at a decent £539

return), which will allow us Brits to discover a Peru beyond Machu Picchu.

With visitor numbers to the South American country climbing by almost a tenth last year, and new hotels opening up all over, Peru is officially hot - and full of surprises. My brief week packed in ancient anal sex, dermis-stealing demons, wildlife interactions and fried cow hearts.

In Lima's Museo Larco, my guide's whistlestop tour contention is thus: though the Incas are the headline act, they weren't actually Peru's most important civilisation. That, in fact, was the much earlier Moche - most important and, seemingly, most kinky. Inside

the museum's erotic pottery rooms awaits a Moche-made phalanx of phalluses and a bevy of breasts. Some couples, painted on vases, are even embarking on the less-biblical kind of intercourse. 'Golly,' I say, taken aback.

Much more traditional is the Sacred Valley - stop giggling at the back - of the Incas, a narrow gorge where you'll find the new Hacienda Urubamba. Focused on promoting the rural, rustic traditions of the area, the hotel's acclaimed owner, Inkaterra, specialises in cultural, eco-tourism practices across

Peru and has received numerous awards for its work.

Following the Urubamba river and flanked by snow-hatted peaks, the Sacred Valley is as fertile as Peru gets. This climatic lottery win explains why the area became an Inca heartland and their

Saucy: The Museo Larco holds many explicit carvings depicting sex; the Hacienda Urubamba in the Sacred Valley (main image)

Quechua language is still spoken today from Pisac to Ollantaytambo.

In between languishing in glass-and-wood casitas, guests at the new 36-room hotel can learn more on guided activities. Farm tours teach how the local purple corn is harvested into lethal beer. Our group hikes up into the peaks, then takes a lantern-lit stroll for some ghost stories. Cheery Ángel tells of pishtacos, nasty bogeymen who skin tourists alive. Wait a minute... tourists? 'Ha ha, yes,' he says. 'Be careful!'

Happily, we make it home, skins intact, for a glorious dinner, full of brave and brilliant combinations. I like the baked local trout smouldered in eucalyptus smoke but I actually fall in love with a corn pie and its guinea pig ragu.

Talking of love, why is everyone kissing in Cusco? Peru's most beautiful city, full of colonial houses and august squares, must also be the most amorous: I lose count of all the couples, young and old, I see locking lips. Maybe there's something in the air. Not that there's much air: Cusco stands at a lung-testing 3,400m high and altitude sickness is a common tourist travail. My hotel, La Casona, a 16th-century mansion and courtyard, even has oxygen cylinders on hand for queasy guests.

To avoid such a common fail, it's best to visit Cusco after the Sacred Valley. I do just this, and avoid getting sick. The latter, only 20 miles away, has an elevation of around 2,700m – meaning it's a useful location for your body to adjust to heady Andean life. As Cusco has an airport, the temptation is to go there first. Ignore this: like most temptations, this one comes with an asterisk. And in this case the asterisk reads 'you'll probably be sick'.

For the non-nauseous, Cusco is compelling. I don't care for the staged tourist performances by folk dancers or sombrero-wearing

pan-pipers but I relish its noisy bars, its smiley shop owners. I sit and read in the Plaza de Armas, walk unhassled around art markets and tickle mewling cats. On Avenida El Sol, cow hearts sizzle on a street-food stall. 'Why not?' I think. They're chewy but tasty. Eventually, I do get to Machu Picchu. And all the hype is justified: the citadel is astonishing and a persuasive, picturesque retort to those prior claims

of Incan inferiority.

Mind-boggling engineering and narrative details

are delivered by guide Braulio, yet I keep getting distracted by those terraced ledges.

They're so perfectly green.

But even that CGI-like grass is forgotten when I encounter something equally gobsmacking near the town below.

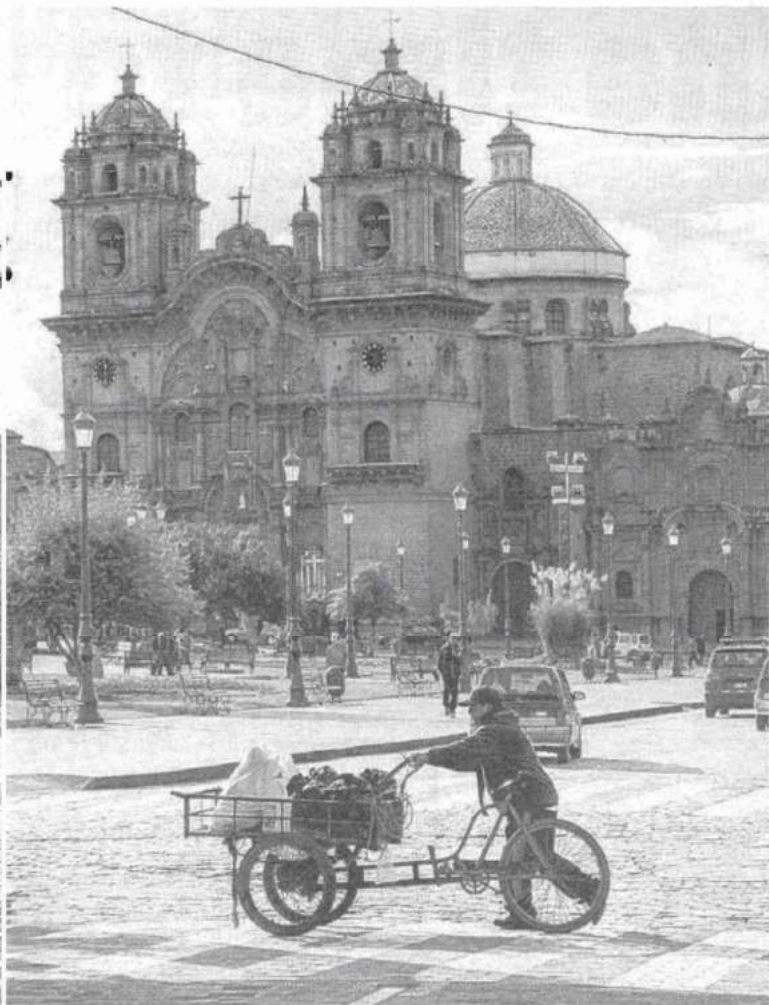
On the eastern edge of Machu Picchu, Pueblo is a

jungly reserve, again overseen by Inkaterra. The first part is reserved for hummingbirds, their wings sounding a lovely thrum. Then comes a spectacled bear sanctuary along whose perimeter one can stroll. Sightings aren't guaranteed, but I luckily catch Coco – a dead ringer for Paddington – devouring a banana leaf just across the wire fence.

He glances up and we gaze at each other. A faint familiarity. A heartbeat or two skipped. I've never felt anything like it. So, Peru. Machu Picchu? Yes, but a whole lot more besides.



Be square: The Plaza de Armas in Cusco is a welcome space to sit and relax

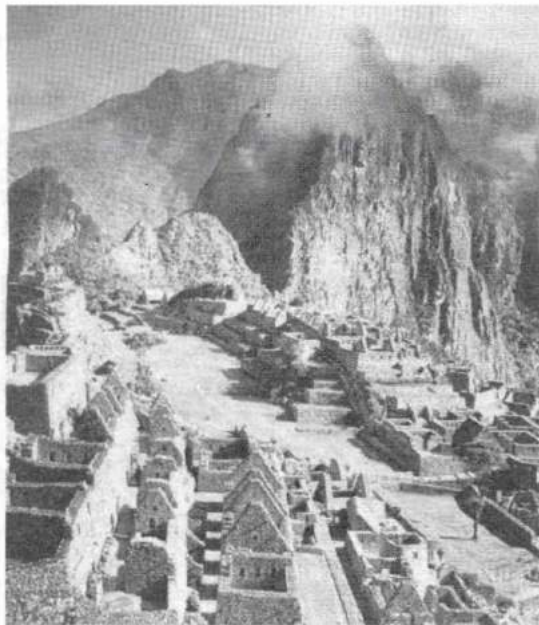




Fertile: The Urubamba river flows through the Inca heartland



Paddington? No, a spectacled bear



Astonishing: The hype around Machu Picchu is justified



Colourful: A local woman
in traditional dress