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# Peruvian Orchids, Bears and Machu Picchu

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In the shadow of Machu Picchu and the Inca Trail, fern-lined, vine-strewn footpaths wind through the cloud forest where the world's largest collection of native orchids in their natural habitat blooms and thrives – with Peruvian biologist Carmen Soto to identify them all. And two new species were recently discovered.



- No orchid is too small for Carmen Soto, the resident biologist at Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel. In fact, the smaller, the more enticing to Soto, who carries a magnifying glass to show her audience the beauty and intricacies of her favorite flowers. Orchids are the largest family of flowers in the world. A special orange orchid is found only in Peru and is the Machu Picchu orchid.



## Machu Picchu Orchid

Soto keeps an orchid calendar and orchid count for the sanctuary. There are 372 species of orchids here and 400 in the Machu Picchu Sanctuary – a special area set aside by the Peruvian government. “December to April is orchid season,” says Soto – when they bloom. Mountain anise also grows here. It’s nature’s pharmacopoeia. Anise is good for the stomach. “Here’s mountain lemon – smell the leaves,” she says as she crushes them, “It’s a mosquito repellent.” Displaying another, Soto enthuses, “This orchid looks like a fern.

Here’s a climbing yellow orchid. Walnut trees grow here, too, and bouncing ladies orchids.”

Besides orchids, the sanctuary harbors five Andean bears. Kina is an Andean bear being rehabilitated at the sanctuary. Some were rescued from a circus. Pepe is 25 years old and the biggest. He was rescued from a zoo. Bears kept in captivity or raised in captivity don’t learn how to properly climb trees, says Soto. “They fall out of the trees. So they can’t really be released in the wild. They don’t have the learned skills of wild bears. They haven’t had their mother around to teach them the right technique.” A little more slender than northern black bears, the Andeans are inky black. They like to eat figs, passion fruit, heliconia, bromeliad, palm leaves, cactus and other forest delicacies

Although they cling to trees, orchids are not parasites, Soto says, pointing out the tiny star orchid that measures 1 cm. It’s smaller than a thumb tack. Here’s an umbrella orchid – it grows under its own leaf, which it uses as an umbrella.

It’s truly a Garden of Eden here high in the Andes, and Soto happily reigns over her paradise. The hotel offers dozens of other nature tours.





The Inkaterra hotel is part of the Inka Terra Asociacion (ITA), which is a nonprofit



Dining room balcony view from Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel

organization devoted to the research and conservation of Amazonian, Andean and Marine ecosystems of Peru. Based on ecotourism, ITA develops research, conservation and education programs through sustainable development models and promoting eco business to benefit local communities.

## Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel



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