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empty promise

Want to wander Machu Picchu without the tourist hordes? **Sally Howard** shares the secrets of this bucket-list favourite so you, too, can have the Andes Mountain wonder all to yourself...

Photography: **Swiatosław Wojtkowiak**



“i

think Paddertin was saying hello,’ relates our guide Maria, lifting her arms and forming claws of her fingers in demonstration.

We’re on board the *Hiram Bingham*, one of the antique Pullman trains that ply the final leg of the journey to Machu Picchu and, as the train-car chugs its susurrating hiss-ker-choo, an Andean meal is being served, in a wobbly and well-meaning fashion, over optimistically white tablecloths. The view through the window is sublime: the bottle greens of the jungle unfolding like a magician’s cape beneath Andean escarpments ruffed with white mist.

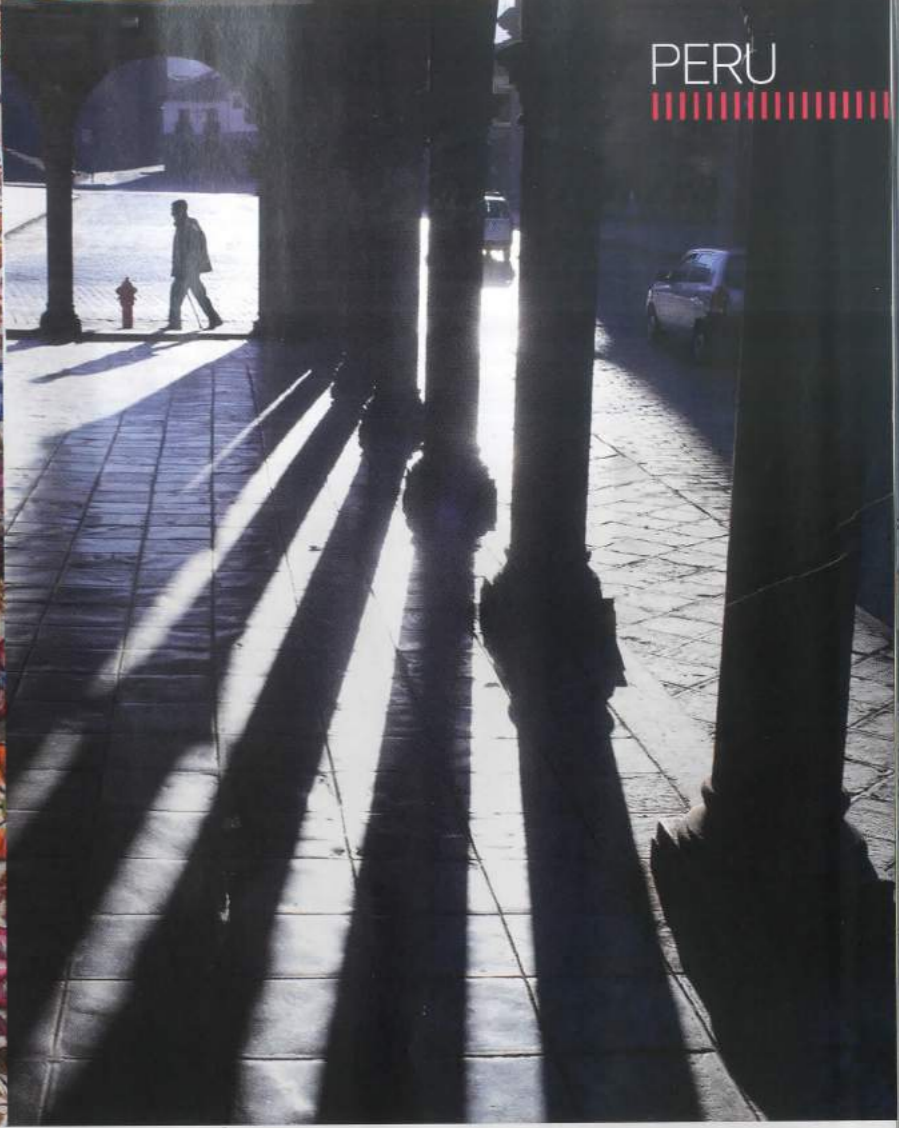
On this same route a week ago, Maria tells us, a short-faced bear rose up six feet on his furry hind legs, window-side, paws aloft. Indeed, half a dozen times in the past month passengers on this same train were tucking into their Incan five-potato salads when the bear we know as Paddington put on a private performance.

‘Was he eating marmalade?’ enquires my boyfriend Tim. Tim’s admiration for Paddington Bear extends to his two-speed footwear collection: boat shoes for the brief flush of British summer and wellies from September through to June.

‘Nooo. The, how you say it? Paddytons, eat bromelias,’ replies Maria, after a bemused beat. ‘And mangoes, but only the mango skins...’

The cult British kids’ book is practically unknown in the country whose native ursines inspired it. But then, who needs a fictional bear in red wellies when you have the real thing? Peru’s Spectacled bears (real name) – with their expressive faces and toddler-like gait – are increasingly coming down from the mountains and into contact with Machu Picchu-bound tourists as avocado farmers encroach on their mountain habitat.

And bear sightings aren’t the only sign of rapid change in this deep-green nook where the Peruvian Andes meet the ‘eyebrow of the Amazon’ (as they call it in these >



parts). Machu Picchu is witnessing a tourist boom that landed more than a million arrivals at its Unesco-listed site in the year 2014 to 2015. In 2014 a tourist was even said to have been hospitalised in the scramble to reach the Temple of the Sun for that lusted-after sunrise shot. Since then, the Government has installed new entrance-gate surveillance cameras and there are plans to create visiting time slots to stagger viewings.

'All the tour companies say "Machu Picchu at sunrise, Machu Picchu at sunrise",' tuts Maria, as we step off the train into the roasted-corn aromas and mercantile bustle of the site's gateway town of Aguas Calientes. 'Pah! That's the *worst* time to go!'

Maria is our secret weapon. A 'mestizo', or half Incan 'black-blood', Maria has picked about the old Inca trails since she was in pigtails. Today, chain-munching alpaca-jerky as her tiny frame bobs up and down in lipstick and trekking shoes, she's our ticket to seeing the old citadel in peace.

Our home for two nights is Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo Lodge, a cluster of luxury *casitas* at the jungle-fringed edge of Aguas Calientes. Dismissed by some as a necessary evil en route to Machu Picchu, this frontier town is, in fact, rather charming – its jostling shops and cafes do sell selfie sticks and sunhats, but also regional handicrafts and indigenous cuisine, such as *lomo saltado* (spiced beef with chips) and fat-kernelled corn, baked until smoky sweet. And bedding down here, Maria advises, is the only way to steal a march on the Machu Picchu hordes.

Despite the brochures' promises, there's really no way of seeing Machu Picchu at sunrise without the crowds. Or, moreover, at sunset, since the site shuts at 5pm, and twilight – thanks to the equatorial latitude – cloaks these storied hills at around 6pm year-round.

But there *is* a secret sweet spot, says Maria. At the *casita*, we follow her sunny injunction to kit up – walking shoes, hat, those perennial wellies – and catch a late bus up the rutted, switchback road to the citadel's main gate. Most of Machu Picchu's 2,500 daily visitors pour through this gate between 6am and 10am. Maria, clearly worth her weight in jerky, lands us here at half past four in the afternoon, when the crowds are thinning out in anticipation of hot showers and Pisco Sour sundowners. We breeze through the turnstile in minutes.

She leads us, at a rapid gait, past all the Machu Picchu icons – the grassy parade of Incan garden terraces, the muscular stolidity of the Principal Temple and enigmatic rounds of the Temple of the Sun, whose windows survey the site like brooding eyes – and on to the densely packed ruins of the ancient industrial zone at the eastern edge of the site. Here, with no other tourists in sight, she beckons us, heads ducked, through a warren of connected stone rooms. Suddenly, a power-cut-dark passageway opens out onto what was once the balcony of a 15th-century Incan stonemason's home and we're greeted with gorgeous, unbroken panoramas of the temples and valleys beyond.

Nothing prepares you for your first sight of Machu Picchu in its entirety: those photogenic walls and >

GET THE RIGHT KIT

Machu Picchu's altitude and proximity to the equator make for skin-frazzling UV levels. Good sun protection is hard to buy outside Lima, so pack factor 50. And wear a hat – for sale in Aguas Calientes market at £3 a pop!

Moving song: opposite, a musician on the Hiram Bingham train from Cuzco to Aguas Calientes. Above, artisanal work for sale in a local souvenir shop; alley in the historical centre of Cuzco



WAYNA PICCHU TOUR TIP

Tickets to the peak are strictly controlled (200 released for 7am climbs, and 200 for 10am, each day). Beware outfits who promise tickets then fail. Instead book direct (at least a month in advance) at machupicchu.gob.pe

terraces curving, improbably, to the plunging contours of a 2,430m-high mountain ridge; those deep-blue peaks – with old-man Machu, the sharp-shouldered Wayna Picchu, wreathed in spectral mist. Today, in the buttery light of late afternoon, those terraced greens shade off into gauzy, blue-gold horizons and an Andean condor seems to capture our mood as he casts sinuous aerial arabesques across the scene.

We all fall silent, appreciatively. Until Tim breaks the spell: 'Aha... aaaachoooo!' He bats at a mosquito that's dancing its own, inelegant pirouette beneath his left nostril. Peruvians take delight in their ectoparasites' predilection for white-gringo flesh. Maria, who's no exception, has her own theory. Through a generous mouthful of jerky she confides that discrete 'teams' of mozzies besiege the jungle air here at different times of the day. At this gilded hour, we've chanced upon the A team: silent, sand-fly-like bugs with a vampiric appetite for new blood. Still, if they put off the crowds of chattering tourists, it's a small price to pay for having Machu Picchu all to ourselves.

Apart, that is, from Tad, whom we find on our walk, doubled over and arms outstretched. 'Dudes: I'm doing the condor!' he announces, unsolicited. Backpacker Tad is fresh from the Inca Trail: the four-day trek through high Andean mountain passes (from the Sacred Valley to Machu Picchu) that's South America's most famous, and most hiked, hike. 'Man, it was busy,' he says, nose to the ground. 'I guess all the baby boomers are doing the big one before they, you know, bite the big one. Ha ha!' I raise

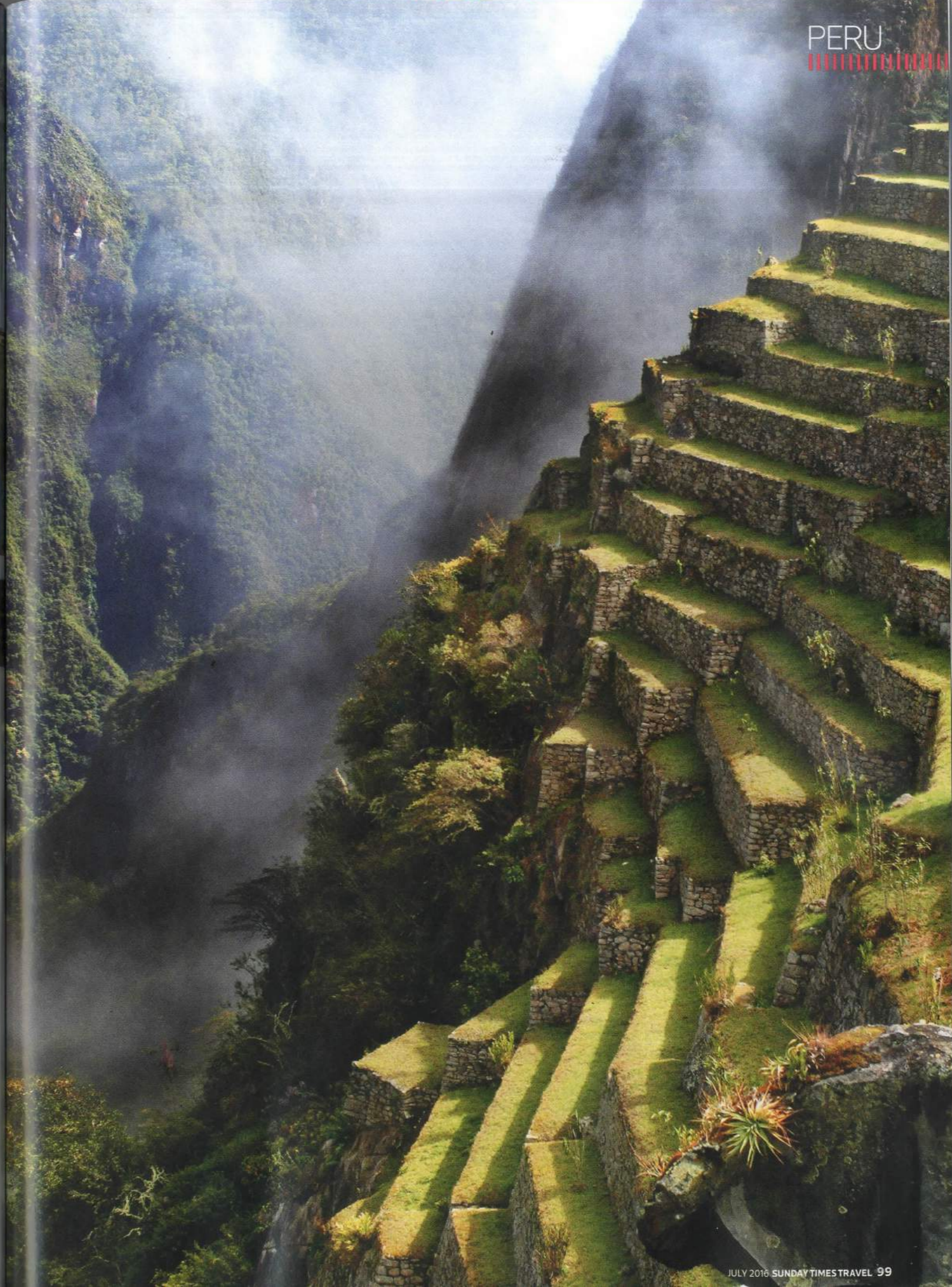
eyebrows at Tim. Had we made the same popular trek, we'd have had to put up with countless Tads.

Thank goodness for Maria. When we walk on across the site we discover its showpiece attractions deserted: the atmospheric natural rock cave of the Royal Tomb, and the Temple of the Sun, its stones finely wrought by ancient, anonymous hands.

Next day, there's no hurry to rise, as Maria has something better in store for us than a trip back up to Machu for the oversubscribed sunrise. So, after a leisurely breakfast of Andean anise bread and jungle-fruit marmalades (no sign of molestation by bespectacled bears), we're back at the citadel gate for the Intipunku trail. Intipunku, or Sun Gate, forms a notch on the southern horizon of the Machu Picchu site. It's the point of entry for trekkers on the Inca Trail and a fine half-day hike in itself: less hair-raising than the vertiginous climb up the peak of Wayna Picchu, but more of a challenge than the other, more popular, day-trek: the 30-minute amble along the cliff-path trail to the old Incan drawbridge.

Most trekkers time their arrival at the Sun Gate for sunrise, but we've set off at lunchtime to avoid the bucket-listers. At this hour, shimmying green lizards and butterflies – white-green specimens as big as gentlemen's handkerchiefs – are our main companions on the trail. Fifteen minutes in, we pop out at the viewpoint for one of the most famous vistas back over the citadel. Here, tame llamas nuzzle the trail backpacks left unattended as their owners gaze at the view. >

At your service: above, dinner on the Hiram Bingham. Opposite, the recognisable stone tiers at Machu Picchu





Suddenly, a dark passageway opens out onto what was once the balcony of a 15th-century Incan stone-cutter's home — the panorama is gorgeous

'Jhrrkkki?' Maria offers us with a glottal emphasis that suggests a sizeable butterfly has lodged itself in her larynx. A nearby llama jealously regards the packet in her hand. 'Jerky is actually a Quechuan word, and an Incan invention,' she continues. 'The Incans created it for their messenger boys to eat when they walked these trails.'

It's not just the jerky that the conquistadors took east. The Spanish left an epidemic of smallpox, but took the Incan gold — stripped and smelted the dazzling yellow metal that decorated Incan temples to fatten the coffers in Madrid. Some academics speculate it was this loss of wealth and the drop in population from the pox, that led to Machu Picchu's abandonment. 'They took our gold and our jerky,' muses Maria, as we regain a trail that's flush with wild orchids and the ochre bromelias the bears find so tasty. 'So I think it's a good thing that we gave them gonorrhoea, too.'

Peru's colonial inheritance is a matter of live debate in public life. The popularity of Machu Picchu has made Peruvians like Maria proud of their Incan blood. A recent TV ad, which we'd caught on a night's stopover in Lima, sums up the mood: 'This country that everyone wants to come to... is your country,' intoned a silky voice over an image of Machu Picchu at sunrise.

We reach Sun Gate in the early afternoon, taking a seat on the sun-warmed stone plinth in front of

the gate's tumbledown arch. It's here the Inca Trail-walkers arrive, broad-smiled and sweaty, to their first glimpse of Machu Picchu. Today, two straggling hikers sit here, aching legs dangling over the stone steps. It's a month before the rainy season and short bursts of rainfall have created double-bowed rainbows that straddle the sun-dappled clouds. I feast my eyes, for the last time, on those mystical greens. Next to me, one of the walkers wipes away a tear with a dusty sleeve.

A couple of days later we are in the Sacred Valley. A woman wearing the peculiar Andean headpiece that looks like a Victorian clerk's bowler hat bears down on us with a menacing expression. In her hand there's a skinned guinea pig on a stick, which she thrusts through the car window, importuning: 'Cuy? Cuy?' as Carlos, our taxi driver, recoils beneath his waxed quiff. It wasn't quite the welcome we'd expected in the Sacred Valley, the lush green dent 40km east of Machu Picchu that's home to the regional capital, Cuzco, and sleepy resorts where the hikers come to unkink after the mountain trails.

Urubamba, the village we're passing through, is famous for guinea pig, the dish Quechuan people consider sacred and some tourists consider an extreme-sport challenge. Maria declares this 'stúpido', pointing

out that Peruvians were nibbling on these rodents a millennium before Britons adopted them as pets.

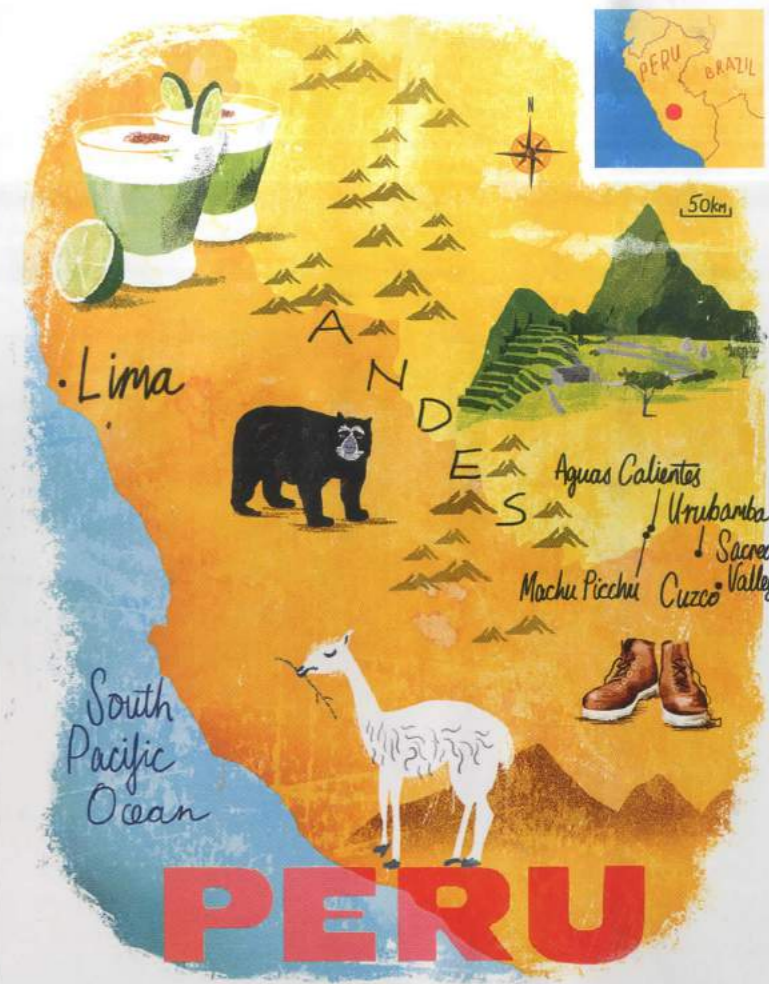
We're headed for the gorgeous luxury ranch lodge Sol y Luna, where we've heard that there may be a famous face in residence. Katy Perry — sporting a bobble-hat and sunglasses the size of car windscreens — had been in our train carriage on the way back down from Aguas Calientes, making a racket with her entourage. There had been talk that Machu Picchu had stayed open late to allow the pop star to view the site at sunset, but two days later we were gratified to discover that she'd been granted no red-carpet treatment. In fact, with no Maria to smooth her path, Perry had seen the citadel with the sunrise crowds. Two days later Perry's Twitterfeed featured the singer crouched on the Sacred Plaza, in sunglasses and hip-hop posture, captioned: 'Living that bucketlist lyfe (sic)'.

That evening we slink into the private hot-tub in our Sol y Luna *casita*. The air's sweet with the smell of eucalyptus-wood fires, and we watch hummingbirds glowing brilliantly in the low evening sun. Tomorrow it's on to Lima for a day of Pisco Sours and ceviche and, reluctantly, our connection home. We had set out to do the bucket-list Machu Picchu in peace. And, despite the odds, we'd done it. We'd had Machu Picchu all to ourselves, in all of its heart-in-the-mouth and tear-in-the-eye glory.

'Though we didn't get to see Paddington,' says Tim, as he tops up my Intipalka Chardonnay.

'Odds on he's in Katy Perry's hot-tub...' ■

PHOTOGRAPHS: 4CORNERS, AWL IMAGES



Get Me There

map: Scott Jessop

Go independent

BA (ba.com) flies to Lima from Gatwick, from £722 return. Or fly indirect with various airlines, including **Lan**, **Air Europa** and **Iberia** — check fares at skyscanner.net.

Where to stay

Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo (00 5116 100400, inkaterra.com; doubles from £347, half board) has colonial-style *casitas* on the edge of Aguas Calientes. In the heart of Aguas, **Hotel La Cabaña Machu Picchu** (00 5184 263230, lacabanamachupicchu.com) offers cabin-style doubles and hearty breakfasts from £85, B&B. **Sol y Luna Lodge Spa** (00 5184 608930, hotelsolyluna.com; doubles from £265, B&B) has *casitas* with views of the white Andean peaks.

Go packaged

Abercrombie & Kent (01242 547701, abercrombiekent.co.uk) can arrange the trip as featured: seven nights in Peru, including international flights and expert tour guides, visiting Lima,

Cuzco and Machu Picchu from £2,660pp. On a budget? **Travelbag** (0871 402 1644, travelbag.co.uk) has an eight-day 'Inca Discovery' trip that includes three days on the Inca Trail exploring Machu Picchu, and a day at the less-visited Ollantaytambo Incan excavation site; from £681pp, including some meals, but not flights.

Further information

June to August are Machu Picchu's busiest months, and the rainy season runs from October to March. If you choose to travel independently, the luxurious Belmond *Hiram Bingham* train from Cuzco to Aguas Calientes costs from £415 return; tickets include on-board meals, drinks and entertainment, a guide and transfers (perurail.com/hiram-bingham). Alternatively, the regular rail service costs from £93 return (perurail.com). Buy tickets to Machu Picchu Historical Sanctuary well in advance (machupicchu.gob.pe; £28). Hire an official guide from *Dircetur* for about £25 at the site (dirceturcusco.gob.pe).

Gateway to heaven: above, left to right, Cuzco, the regional capital; llamas pose helpfully for visitors