

COMING ROUND — THE — MOUNTAIN

From the heights of Machu Picchu to the depths of the Sacred Valley,
Ellie Ross discovers an eco-luxury side to Peru

‘Nothing can prepare you for the cliff-drop view and 100 shades of green at Machu Picchu’



Paddington Bear (real name Coco), from deepest, darkest Peru, is right in front of me. This spectacled bear had been brought in after his owner kept him tied up on his patio but, having been cared for by some of Peru's top conservationists at Inkaterra, an operation specialising in sustainable tourism, Coco is semi-wild again.

The day had started off quite misty and a grey drizzle hangs over Machu Picchu. Compared to its loftier neighbours, Cusco and Urubamba, the town is barely at altitude, but the rain makes it feel eerily secluded. The fact that the only way to access it is by rail only adds to the mystique.

Erosion issues at Machu Picchu have been in the news for the last five years and, with 2,000 tourists visiting each day, environmentalists have warned that there could soon be irreversible damage to the Incan town. But that doesn't mean you should stay away – carefully planned, your trip can actually help, not hinder, the local economy.

The Inkaterra group is a world leader in conservation. Committed to both environment and community, the award-winning enterprise offers lodgings right around the country, all promoting eco-credentials including 100% carbon neutrality.



Nothing can prepare you for Machu Picchu. No photograph can convey the cliff-drop view and 100 shades of green. At dawn, the clouds roll back off the mountains to reveal the ancient city in all its magnificence; its abundant terracing testament to the Incans' architectural skill. Nobody ever lived here – the city was never finished, its inhabitants fleeing from the Spanish before completion.

Later that day, I return to Ollantaytambo, the gateway to the Sacred Valley, the train chugging along the deep-sided valley. In a country known for Shamanism and a breed of mysticism long associated with the Incas, nowhere is more associated with the otherworldly than the Sacred Valley.

Discovering Shamanism

Inkaterra's Hacienda Urubamba in the Sacred Valley welcomes me with open arms and a trail of lanterns, the hotel's glass atrium lit with flickering candles. I leave behind a deft bartender turning out pisco sours and step into the dusk to discover tales of the Shamans. The valley is completely still and, as we walk, my guide Angel tells me stories.

'Pachamama is Mother Earth. In this valley, we believe that the land is alive and it provides food for us if we honour it. Rituals are a way of life for us – we are at one with

the earth.' He explains how the valley people use coco leaves to tell fortunes. 'We also have sacred beer called Chicha de Jora. It's made from white corn – the longer it's fermented, the stronger it is.'

When darkness has fallen, we sit on benches, our faces lit by flickering lanterns as Angel continues. 'Shamanic beliefs are still strong. If a shaman has a child, the responsibilities of a shaman will pass onto them. In some people's houses you'll find a skull of a man. Shamans believe this protects the house. I believe this too.'

Food for the gods

The excursion has built an appetite – luckily, Inkaterra properties are known for their eco-farms and local produce. Many of the ingredients I'd seen in the kitchen garden are on the table, along with baked smobish (river trout from Pumahuanca) with black olive sauce, octopus, asparagus and eucalyptus smoke; tagliatelle with mountain mushrooms that ripen after being struck by lightning; and guinea pig ragù. As I mop my plate with bread baked with lard, the fire in the dining room crackles. Back in my room, I watch the lights of neighbouring villages flicker around the Sacred Valley from my verandah. Deepest, darkest Peru suits me just fine.



Travel in style

Machu Picchu has no roads – and the most stylish way to arrive is via Peru Rail's private rail option; complete with bar, butler, balcony and fabulous food.
perurail.com

Take me there

Cox & Kings has a tailor-made Inkaterra holiday to Peru for 10 days / 8 nights from £2,795pp twin share. The tour includes international flights from London and domestic flights, private airport transfers, and daily breakfast, plus rail tickets and excursions to Machu Picchu. Accommodation is for 2 nights in Lima, 1 night at the Inkaterra Hacienda Urubamba, 1 night at the Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo, 2 nights at the Inkaterra La Casona Cusco and 2 nights at the Inkaterra Reserva Amazónica.
coxandkings.co.uk