

high life

CHANGE YOUR VIEW

DECEMBER 2016



WHAT IF?

THE POSSIBILITIES ISSUE

A ROAD

LESS

TRAVELLED

Crowd control
From left: tourists waiting in line at the entry point of Machu Picchu; taking a selfie in front of the world-famous ruins



One million visitors descend on the world's most famous ruins every year but, until recently, the profits didn't reach those who deserve them most. Now, **Hugh Thomson** takes a tour that opens up a neglected route to Machu Picchu on the local people's terms. Photography by **Michael Turek** →



Off the track

From above: a local woman at the Huacahuasi Lodge; the train tracks leading through Aguas Calientes, the town below Machu Picchu



T

he Sacred Valley near Cusco must have some of the most inspiring landscapes in Peru. The Urubamba river threads its way past Inca terraces and ruins as the glaciers of towering 20,000-foot Andean peaks glisten in the distance. Neat fields of maize and wheat surround the small market towns, while jacaranda,

hibiscus and palm trees grow in the central plazas. This is tremendously fertile soil – the grain basket of the Incas.

The Sacred Valley has retained its charm but, over the past 30 years, a mass influx of tourism means that much has changed in the area. On the route between Cusco and Machu Picchu, it is a natural stopping point for visitors making a pilgrimage to the world-famous Inca monument.

Hotels have sprung up along the route, some of them luxury offerings where alpaca roam the lawns and herb-scented candles perfume the bedrooms. But they have brought with them questions over whether the profits from tourism are directed to local people.

Sensitivity about exploitation of the Inca past is rife. It was only in 2012 that the artefacts found at Machu Picchu were finally returned after the American explorer Hiram Bingham took them to Yale in 1912 'for a short period of research'.

In the past, this sensitivity has led to riots in Machu Picchu. The Machu Picchu train has repeatedly been attacked using some of the same techniques that the Inca employed against the Spanish – firing slingshots and felling trees along the route.

Many feel the considerable funds brought by more than one million yearly visitors are siphoned off to the capital, Lima, rather than being reinvested in the area. 'After all,' as one local told me, 'it was our ancestors who built the place – it's our patrimony.'

When I arrive, the road that leads up the steep hill to the ruins has been blocked by locals protesting against the bus company that covers the route. A few years ago they torched the helicopter pad at Machu Picchu on the grounds that tourists flying directly into the site would miss the handicrafts available at the railway station.

But, as any guide knows, the best way to absorb Machu Picchu is by walking through the mountains. An enterprising company called Mountain Lodges of Peru has devised a trek that allows you to do just that, threading above the Sacred Valley and visiting some of its most remote communities – at the same time as returning some of the proceeds to the villages on the way. It has built lodges in these isolated highlands with huge glass windows that take in the scale and enormity of the landscape.

When I join one of these trips, we stay at Huacahuasi Lodge, where 20 per cent of Mountain Lodges of Peru's profits from 2015 were returned to the community. It's a good excuse for a party – not that Quechua people ever need one. The *chicha* maize beer here flows like a mountain stream.

The route takes our small group of a dozen along Inca trails and over 15,000 feet of Andean passes. As we visit remote hamlets, ➔

the problem facing Peruvians here becomes apparent. Even when there are schools and medical outposts, there are no teachers or medics to man them. Another grave problem in rural Peru is the widespread lack of drinking water, a scandal in a country that has achieved considerable economic growth over the last ten years and has an expanding middle class.

Our guide, Aly Amaut, occasionally alarms more timid members of the group with comments such as, 'You should try roast guinea pig at least once. As they say at KFC, "It's finger lickin' good."' But Amaut also takes time to show us the serious matter of how people work the land. We stop to watch a family planting a small plot above Pisac, which they have laboriously ploughed by hand as it is too high and steep for oxen or tractors (not that locals can afford them). The father of the family is digging holes which the mother then lines with alpaca droppings before the children carefully plant potatoes in them.

Many visitors assume that it was the Incas who came up with the name the Sacred Valley, but the term was in fact a marketing invention in 1950, designed to promote a driving rally held in the valley. There are sacred sites along it, but this was an agricultural area and the climate here is particularly suitable for growing maize – essential for the ritual drinking of *chicha*. The Incas' ability to build terraces on seemingly inaccessible slopes in this area is astounding.

In the weave

From below left: a local hiking guide on the track from Amaru to Viacha; a woman holds a spool of alpaca wool

Weaving is one of the traditions that has continued unabated. The Incas famously had no form of writing, and they poured all their creativity into textiles, which they valued more highly than gold, much to the conquering Spaniards' surprise.

I talk to an enterprising women's collective that still uses some of the original non-synthetic methods to colour cloth –

eucalyptus leaves for grey, walnuts for brown and, of course, cochineal red, the intense colour made from crushing the beetles found on cacti. It's such an impressive shade that some experts think the Spaniards made more money exporting it over the centuries than from all the gold they took from Peru.

To keep the colours fixed, the women use urine that has been fermented for more than two months, so their workshops can have a somewhat earthy atmosphere. Wherever we go in the Sacred Valley, we see women either spinning yarns as they walk or using hand-looms outside their houses.

At our own lodges, I am grateful for the Jacuzzis, which force me to revisit a passage of my 2002 book, *The White Rock*, in which I was ambivalent about efforts to meet tourists' demands here. 'There are even – the horror, the horror! – now hotel lodges built on some of the most beautiful isolated passes... Although if invited in for a complimentary Jacuzzi and martini after a long day's trek, I doubt I would refuse.' And nor do I. ➔



GET THE MOST OUT OF MACHU PICCHU

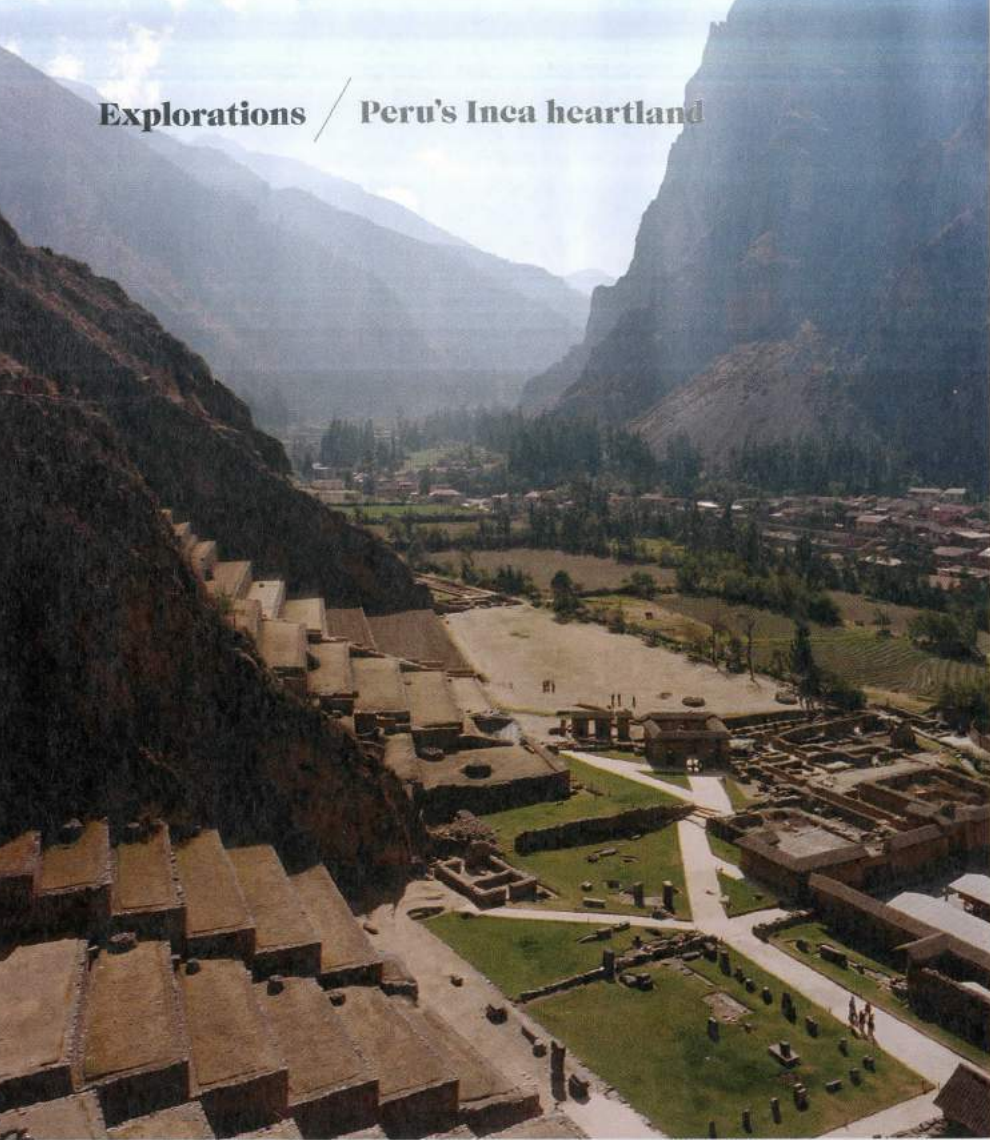
|→| Plan to spend at least one night in nearby Aguas Calientes, so that you can visit the ruins twice.

|→| On your first day, go late, when the crowds have left and tickets are cheaper. Dusk over the ruins is beautiful.

|→| On the second morning, climb the neighbouring peaks, Machu Picchu mountain or Huayna Picchu mountain.

|→| *The Machu Picchu Guidebook: A Self-Guided Tour*, by Ruth M Wright (£17, Johnson Books) is an excellent guide.

|→| Machu Picchu is in the cloud forest – which can mean mosquitoes – be sure to pack insect repellent.



**WHERE TO STAY
EN ROUTE
TO MACHU PICCHU**

|→| **BELMOND
PALACIO
NAZARENAS**

Swim in Cusco's first outdoor heated swimming pool. And, at 11,000ft above sea level, this urban retreat has 55 suites – which are enriched with oxygen for a good sleep. BA offers four nights from £1,999 for selected departures in May.¹ ba.com/peru

|→| **EL MERCADO,
CUSCO**

Open fires in the courtyard warm up cold evenings. From £150pn based on two people sharing on a B&B basis. elmercadocusco.com

**WHERE TO STAY
NEAR THE
SACRED VALLEY**

|→| **INKATERRA
MACHU PICCHU
PUEBLO**

Relax at the Unu Spa, then eat overlooking the Vilcanota River. From £188pp for double occupancy half-board (breakfast and dinner), as well as guided excursions within the property. inkaterra.com

|→| **INKATERRA
HACIENDA
URUBAMBA**

This hotel offers views of the mountains and architecture inspired by the region's cultural history. From £317pn, including breakfast and guided excursions with an Inkaterra guide. inkaterra.com

We end our trek by taking a bike trail along the bottom of the valley, with the wood smoke drifting past the eucalyptus stands and the sun setting on the Chicón glacier. At Pachar, near the Inca fortress town of Ollantaytambo, there is now a brewery selling craft beers – a reminder of how the valley is adapting to the 21st century. There are still local villagers keeping horses, minding small plots and threatening to shoot the neighbours if the irrigation canal isn't turned over at the appointed hour – but just when you least expect it, a four-wheel drive flashes past blaring out hip-hop.

We take the train to Machu Picchu – with no protestors throwing rocks at us – and stay at one of my favourite hotels in the world, the Inkaterra Pueblo, a riverside oasis of orchids and hummingbirds, whose owner, José Koechlin, has pioneered Peruvian eco-tourism both here and at the other Inkaterra hotels in Urubamba and the Amazon.

It's the perfect place to stay before a visit to what, for me, is still one of the greatest triumphs of the human imagination. In recent years Machu Picchu has endured various vicissitudes – the erosion of the finely wrought granite, caused by the feet of more than one million tourists a year, forest fires, the threat of landslides and even the dropping of a film crane on the site's finest sculpture, the Intihuatana, during the shooting of a beer commercial.

Yet however many times I go – and I've lost count – the place has an extraordinary ability to calm and uplift me. Even the most hardened traveller would be taken aback by this city draped almost casually over the shoulder of a mountain ridge, with the distant hills of Vilcabamba in the background.

Stepping up
Inca ruins loom over
Ollantaytambo

And the trip is much more worth its while after trekking above the Sacred Valley first and taking the trouble to spend time with the Quechua, the modern-day descendants of the Inca. It is unlikely that anyone's visit to Machu Picchu will be interrupted by a political disturbance, as they are always very occasional. But the people who built 'the lost city of the Incas' in the first place should never be forgotten – and should certainly share in the profits of its fame. ■

■

🐦 @Hugh_Author

Hugh Thomson is the author of The White Rock and Cochineal Red. Audley can arrange a 12-day itinerary to Peru, including Mountain Lodges of Peru's seven-day Lares Adventure to Machu Picchu, from £5,105pp. Price includes all international and domestic flights, and taxes, transfers, selected tours and all meals while on the trek. For more information, visit audleytravel.com or call +44 (0)1993 838620.



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