

DEPARTURES

Peru's Sacred Valley, Found

By Elaine Glusac on November 30, 2016



Long bypassed en route to Machu Picchu, Peru's ancient Incan landscape is finally more accessible.

About 30 switchback miles north of the city of Cuzco, in south-eastern Peru halfway between Lima and the Bolivian border, is the Andes-walled Sacred Valley. The overlooked region—covering about 35 miles between Pisac and Ollantaytambo the hub for Machu Picchu-bound trains—offers a new entrée to Andes high country, where alpaca herders roam glacier-studded expanses.

The Incas believed Cuzco was the “navel of the world.” From here, 11,000 feet above sea level, their culture spread to the valley and Machu Picchu, a citadel still being built when the Spanish arrived in 1532. Though the conquistadors overthrew the Incan territory, they never found the natives’ architectural site.

Regional tourism has developed in reverse sequence—out from Machu Picchu—but there are signs that the old order is being restored. With a spate of new hotels and lodges that have recently opened, the Sacred Valley is emerging as a stand-alone destination. And more travel options are on the way: In May, Belmond will launch the region’s first luxury overnight train, the Andean Explorer.

“People don’t spend enough time in the Sacred Valley,” says Stephanie Gulledge, who guides trips in the area for tour operator Butterfield & Robinson. “But that’s changing.”

It’s not that the Sacred Valley has completely escaped the radar. As word got out about mountain biking to the ancient salt pools at Maras and whitewater rafting on the Class III rapids of the upper Urubamba River, the valley has become an adventure base camp. Although the area’s intimate hotels do cater to leisure travelers who want less hard-core adventures, from bird-watching to stargazing.

“Two years ago it was Cuzco and then Machu Picchu,” says Ovidio de Felipe, general manager of the six-year-old riverside **Tambo del Inka** (rooms from \$330; Avda. Ferrocarril S/N; 51-84/581-777; tambodelinkaresort.com), one of the area’s largest hotels at just 128 rooms. “Now people stay a minimum of three days in the valley doing sports.”

The latest hotel, opened in July, is the minimalist, 50-room **Explora Valle Sagrado** (rooms from \$1,910; Funda Sala Bella-Silvayoc S/N Urganillos; 51-84/300-000; explora.com), located down a slow lane of potholes and waterfalls in Urquillos. It’s the valley’s first luxury all-inclusive, with 27 guided excursions, from hikes to ruin visits. (They’re best for the very active.) “We don’t see it as a hotel but as an exploration company,” says Rodrigo Donoso, general manager of Explora, which also operates in Patagonia and Atacama (the latter of which is being rebuilt after a 2015 fire) in Chile. A spa 12 years in the making opens this winter.

Most of the other top stays lie off Highway 28B, linking a succession of tiny towns. José Koechlin, founder of Inkatererra, which has four lodges in Peru, predicts the valley will become “a tourism buffer zone” for trips across the state of Cuzco. His first property there, **Inkaterra Hacienda Urubamba** (rooms from \$462; Ctra. Cuzco-Urubamba-Pisac-Calca, km. 63; 51-1/610-0400; inkaterra.com), opened in 2015, with 12 rooms in a colonial-style hacienda and 24 hillside casitas. It has an organic farm where guests make *chicha*, the local fermented corn drink.



A lounge in the main house at Inkaterra Hacienda Urubamba. *Courtesy of Inkaterra Hotels*

The 43-room Relais & Châteaux **Sol y Luna** (rooms from \$309; *Fundo Huincho Lote A5 08661*; 51-84/608-930; hotelsolyluna.com) set the standard in the valley when it opened in 2000. Opt for the casitas with outdoor Jacuzzis or fireplaces. The stables lodge Peruvian Paso horses, known for their smooth gait, which guests ride to Inca sites. Nearby, the 23-room **Belmond Hotel Rio Sagrado** (rooms from \$385; *Ctra. Urubamba-Ollantaytambo, km. 75.8*; 51-84/201-631; belmond.com) provides a link between sibling properties in Cuzco and Machu Picchu. Guests can raft the Urubamba edging the property.

Though day-trippers are beginning to beat a path through the Sacred Valley from Cuzco, travelers still have the lowlands to themselves for now. And with most hotels having 50 or fewer rooms, the area stands to remain rural. Inca-built canals still irrigate terraces of crops, and native Quechua traditions thrive. “Customs of honoring the earth are alive,” says Explora guide Abel Santander. “We worry more about losing that than tourism.”

The State of Machu Picchu

Limited to 2,500 visitors per day, Machu Picchu often hosts many more. (An August admission purchased from a travel agency worked without so much as a raised eyebrow, though it was postdated two weeks.) The surge in visitors after it became a World Heritage site in 1983 has led to concerns about waste management and damage, and UNESCO has advocated for stricter environmental regulations.

In response, a new master plan, adopted in 2015 and to be implemented by 2019, broadens Machu Picchu’s scope to include new paths and a welcome center at the foot of the mountain. (The current entrance is at the top, accessible by a 90-minute walk or 20-minute bus ride from Aguas Calientes, at the site’s base.) Entry will be staggered, with 100 people allowed every ten minutes, or potentially 6,000 a day. That’s more than twice the current max, so the plan aims to curb gridlock with time limits.

Belmond Sanctuary Lodge (*rooms from \$1,200; Ctra. Hiram Bingham, km. 7.5; 51-84/211-038; belmond.com*), the only hotel at the gates, is the best option for an overnight. In Aguas Calientes, **Sumaq Machu Picchu Hotel** (*rooms from \$479; Avda. Hermanos Ayar MZ1L-3; 51-84/211-059; machupicchuhotels-sumaq.com*) was just renovated.

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