



Nick Ballon

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## In Peru's Sacred Valley, Peace Awaits

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High in the Andes lies the the fertile paradise that gave rise to the Incan Empire which, even today, remains a place of almost divine communion between the land and its people.

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On our first night in the Sacred Valley, we blanketed ourselves in down and left the windows open to the chill of the Andes. Near dawn, we woke to gold-flecked finches trilling in the fields. The Sacred Valley isn't somewhere you go to sleep in; you go to watch the way the light and clouds interact—the way different peaks are shadowed, then exposed.

My boyfriend, Matt, and I had come to this storied place in the mountains of [Peru](#) for a week. We were staying first at the Explora Valle Sagrado, a resort on an old corn plantation outside the village of Urquillos that is set up to help guests get outside and experience the area as fully as possible. Our first activity, at eight that morning, was an easy bike ride along the Urubamba River.

After multiple cups of coffee and seconds on avocado toast and bowls of papaya, we met our guide, Luis, who made sure we were equipped. We could refill our water bottles with filtered water all over the property, he told us. At reception, there were snacks—cashews, almonds, dried mango, bitter dark chocolate, and “power balls” (quinoa, honey, dates, amaranth) to scoop from overflowing bowls. We were encouraged to dip into the huge containers of pasty white sunblock—SPF 100.

A bus took us to Taray, which sits just across the river from Pisac, a picturesque Andean village below a beautifully preserved Incan citadel with terraces that cascade down the mountain. From there, we pedaled for 20 relatively flat miles along a dirt trail. We rode past scenes of agrarian life that were so idyllic they almost looked staged: farmers working cornfields by hand or by donkey, women walking llamas. We passed crumbling manors and corrugated-steel sheds that were exquisitely juxtaposed against summits and glaciers. The sky was so broad, the panorama so dynamic, that we kept twisting around on our bikes to see more. Every time I finished an incline, I felt the elevation: a slight vertigo that caught me by surprise.

On breaks, there was hot tea made from *muña*, an Andean herb similar to mint that is excellent for digestion and altitude sickness. When we finished the ride, we found a table set up with raw vegetables, avocado dip, and a bucket of water and beer. This was in a quiet plaza in Urquillos, less a town than a small outcropping of adobe buildings with terra-cotta-tiled roofs. We sat under a towering *pisonay* tree with scarlet-red blossoms. Luis told us that the *pisonay* was sacred to both the Incas and their descendants, the Quechua, who have

inhabited the Andes for the past six centuries. Whenever the Spanish built a church, the Quechua planted a *pisonay* tree nearby.

“For Pachamama,” Luis said, pouring beer onto the roots of the tree before drinking some himself. Pachamama, the benevolent fertility deity of Incan mythology, is the Mother Earth of the Andes. The Quechua perform this toast—called a *challa*—constantly. It’s just one of the many ways they act out their gratitude for their awe-inspiring natural surroundings.

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I have a long history of hiking and a fondness for the remote, and I still plan trips around walks. Matt must have recognized this immediately, because within a month of meeting he had me winter-camping in Death Valley. I shivered and grinned in a freezing rain, got up in the pitch-black to watch the sun rise over the salt flats. And while I do cherish time in a lounge chair reading and diving in to the cuisine of a place, the truth is that when I travel I’m often seeking some holier connection. A moment of quiet that will leave its mark on me. And that usually leads me outside.

The design of the Explora Valle Sagrado maximizes guests' experience of the surrounding mountains. [Nick Ballon](#)

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We had arrived the day before, from Los Angeles by way of Lima and Cuzco. Most visitors don’t stay in the Sacred Valley nearly as long as we planned to. More often, they spend a night on their way to Machu Picchu, going to Pisac and Chincero on a day trip to take a few photographs and buy textiles, skipping the ruins in the hills above Ollantaytambo, the multiple unesco World Heritage sites, and the traditional farms and fields that still power this fertile center of Andean civilization. Recently, though, elegant properties like the Explora Valle Sagrado have begun catering to active travelers like us by offering more intimate, less mediated ways to experience the region’s natural splendors.

Everyone brings up altitude sickness when you tell them you’re visiting the Andes. Even the flight attendants warned us about it as the plane descended. But I only took it seriously with my first woozy step onto the tarmac in Cuzco, elevation 11,000 feet.

“I think I have it,” I told Matt.

“You barely slept,” he replied. “You don’t know what you have.” He was thoroughly energized, as usual. Whether I had it or not, I was definitely in better shape than the woman I saw in the airport bathroom leaning over the sink, heaving, her face drained of color.

Uneasily, I boarded the Explora charter shuttle. As it wound along the curvy mountain roads, I sipped from a canteen of chilled water I'd been given and studied an elegant hotel brochure, *The Art of Travel*, which asked pseudo-philosophical questions like, *¿Por qué exploramos?* Matt, who speaks fluent Spanish, struck up a conversation with the man behind us. I heard the word *arquitecto*.

“Architect of what?” I whispered.

“*The architect. Of all the Exploras.*”

The man was José Cruz Ovalle, who has worked for Explora since 1993, when the company opened its first property in Torres del Paine National Park in Chilean Patagonia. He designs his buildings, he told Matt, to be in conversation with nature, to enhance and expand the outside rather than insulate guests from it. Explora applies the same ethic to the overall experience, offering guests unique itineraries, or what it calls explorations, that often follow new trails or routes and access remote parts of the countryside.

Our shuttle stopped high on a hill, allowing us to approach the hotel on foot. Bridges spanning terraces linked us to a low building down below where the lights were coming on. I tried to follow Cruz Ovalle and Matt's conversation about the 15th-century cornfield the hotel sits beside. Corn was akin to gold for the Incas, Cruz Ovalle explained, and this heirloom variety of *paraqay sara*, a large, white-kerneled corn also called the “giant white maize of Cuzco,” is still regarded as the best in Peru. The jade of the corn leaves was a color I'd never seen before. Rimming the field were purple-flowering quinoa plants that twitched with birds. Jagged, snowcapped mountains loomed beyond. The sky was dusky, as if stained by the purple of the flowers.

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That evening set the pattern for our nights at the Explora Valle Sagrado. We ordered pisco sours at the bar, which came accompanied by endless trays of Andean bar snacks that I couldn't stop eating: crunchy plantains, fava beans, corn kernels, some the size of tiny raindrops, some as fat as a knuckle. Then, in the lounge, a guide found us to sort out our explorations for the next day. *What's your activity level at home? How are you feeling?* The hyper-personalized interaction with an expert makes you feel like you can accomplish anything.

Still, I had second thoughts when Matt announced what he wanted us to do the day after our bike ride: a hike called Incañan that is considered the pinnacle of all Explora activities. It is 11 miles long and climbs more than 3,000 feet, reaching an elevation above 15,000 feet. It

features three distinct topographies, passing glaciers, remote Quechuan villages, and Mount Sawasiray, which soars to a majestic 19,088 feet. It is supposed to require three to four days of acclimation. We'd had one. Matt seemed not to care at all.

"It's against our policy," our new guide, Bruno, said carefully. He was beloved by the English-speaking guests because he had perfected the language while living in New York City.

"We can do it," Matt said.

"Well, you seem fit," he said, "but, you know, I had these Americans earlier this month—just like you, city people—and we let them go after three days of acclimation. It took us almost ten hours on the trail and the lady was throwing up the whole time. I think she was fairly...unhappy."

Visions of myself a whitish green, vomiting in front of a group of strangers. Visions of rain and snow and wet socks. I turned to Matt. "No way. I do not want to be unhappy."

"We hike all the time," he said. "It only goes up to fifteen thousand. You hiked fourteeners when you lived in Colorado."

"What is this 'all the time?' And I was sixteen years old!" Bruno was amused. I grabbed the map.

"Cinco Lagunas sounds pretty. Five lakes. Doesn't that sound pretty?" I reviewed the options. "What's comparable to Incañan?"

"Nothing," Bruno shrugged. "But there's some nice hikes."

"Babe." Matt was about to utter the phrase that is always the nail in my coffin when we travel together. "How many times are we going to get this opportunity?"

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It was pouring rain when we got up in darkness at 5 a.m. It bent the quinoa plants, pounded the leaves of the corn. "*Pouring*," I said, glaring, as we stuffed our backpacks.

We met Bruno and another guide, Moises, as well as two fellow guests who would be joining us. Everyone wore head-to-toe rain gear. "Do you have pants?" Bruno asked about my SoulCycle leggings.

“These *are* pants,” I said, gritting my teeth.

A Quechua woman follows the route of the Explora Valle Sagrado's Incañan hike. [Nick Ballon](#)

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It was a long drive to the trailhead, long enough that the rain stopped and the hills greened and I lost my morning angst. I began to feel a nauseated excitement, though it could have just been the altitude.

I stubbornly took the lead as we hit the trail. It only took a few minutes in that bracing air before the muscle memory kicked in, and not just in my legs. It was an emotional muscle memory of going into a space where the only noise is wind. Already above the tree line, we climbed to a high alpine meadow laced with streams and carpeted with moss and petite wildflowers. Alpacas, llamas, and herding dogs dotted the valley floor, tended by women in bright-red woven skirts and bowler hats. We passed diminutive stone cottages with thatched roofs, shelters actively used by herding families. I saw stacks of dried animal dung that, Moises said, the Quechua use for fuel for cooking. Waste converted to energy: another way these people find harmony with their landscape.

As I struggled with the ascent, Moises mentioned that the children who live in these houses hike an hour and a half each way to school. I noticed that rather than following a well-marked trail, we were ascending the contour lines of the hillside. All of the Explora guides had trained for at least five months prior to its opening, so Bruno and Moises knew every footstep of these mountains, in every kind of weather.

They also knew when to offer up the bag of coca leaves. Coca was a divine plant to the Incas, and even today, chewing coca leaves is a mark of the Quechua's connection to the earth. The leaves are a cure for altitude sickness and a mild stimulant on par with a cup of coffee, but because they are also used to produce cocaine, they have long been controversial. A United Nations ban in the 1960s, since relaxed, outlawed their use, but they have remained an integral part of Quechuan culture. As a lover of all things bitter, I was happy to chew them as we hit the final, steepest section of the ascent.

The reception area at the Explora Valle Sagrado. [Nick Ballon](#)

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I was soon overcome by two realizations: The first was that I was feeling quite ill. My head

hurt. I was nauseated. If I didn't focus intensely on my breathing, my chest would tighten as if in panic. The second was that I was going to be the first up the mountain, even ahead of Bruno. Not because I'm proud, or particularly fit. I was just in a rhythm with my breath, my steps, my arms, the wind, and I wasn't going to break it until I hit the pass. I had achieved both the sickness I feared and the meditative state I desired. I should have known they would come together.

We could only celebrate at the top for a moment, toasting with *muña* tea in the fierce wind before heading into another valley and skirting turquoise glacial lakes, until we found a rocky outcropping large enough to shield us. Lunch—a velvety spinach soup, smoked trout, and quinoa salad—felt well-earned. We spent the rest of the day on the downhill, our knees aching. When we reached the hamlet of Cancha Cancha, we all splashed river water on our faces. Matt and the guides examined the onion-skin bark of the squat *queuña* trees. Only then did I see other hikers, walking past us in the opposite direction.

“They can't be starting now,” I said to Bruno. The sun had already passed beyond a ridge.

“Oh no, they are camping,” he said. Donkeys followed them, loaded with equipment. The guides, chewing coca leaves, called out to Bruno and Moises.

“They do it in three days,” Bruno said, gesturing back at the pass we'd just conquered. “We do it in one. Because we're badass.”

I laughed, but he wasn't joking. I looked back at the peak of Sawasiray, shrouded in a mist that moved like exhalations. I imagined what it must feel like to be as well-adapted as those highland children: the thin, pure air stabilizing me, walking these mountains being an act as natural as breathing.

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Although the Incas never had a written language (which blew my mind when I found out), they are legendary for their myriad accomplishments prior to their culture's swift and bloody collapse at the hands of Spanish conquistadors. At their peak, the Incas controlled a region twice the size of the Holy Roman Empire. Their engineering feats were unmatched by peers of their era. Their religious practices involved complex mummification and burial processes. Their knowledge of astronomy and agriculture allowed them to become brilliant farmers.



It was this last skill we were headed to see evidence of. The van took us on narrow, rutted dirt roads to Moray, an Incan archaeological site above the town of Maras that consists of elaborate terraces in concentric circles. There is a more direct route in, but we entered above the ruins on a trail that started in a small village called Misminay, where children walked alongside us and giggled shyly before running back to their games. At first, Moray reminded me of an amphitheater, making me think of the frequent comparisons between the Incas and the Romans. But Moray wasn't built for sport. It is believed that the Incas' goal was to create microclimates for growing crops, like coca leaves or tobacco, that weren't adapted to the harsh conditions of the highlands above the Sacred Valley.

As we began hiking out of the ruins, another spectacular twilight descended and the mountains' aura of mystery deepened. I was struck by how little we could know of a culture that didn't write its own stories. For generations, the Quechua theorized about how Moray got its craterlike shape—our guide told us it was the result of an asteroid strike—though scientists have determined that it was caused by erosion. We have extensive, well-preserved evidence of the Incas, but much of it is inconclusive. The guides are the storytellers, the ones who tell us what might have been. On the way out of Moray, ours collected *muña* and cleaned up trash that had been left behind by other visitors. It didn't feel showy or self-righteous. It felt more like the *challa* to Pachamama—an expression of deep gratitude for the earth.

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The interior patio at the Inkaterra Hacienda Urubamba, in a traditional Andean farmhouse. [Nick Ballon](#)

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Following three adventure-packed days at the Explora Valle Sagrado, Matt and I headed across the Urubamba River to unwind at the Inkaterra Hacienda Urubamba, a two-year-old property from a company that has been a mainstay in Peruvian luxury travel for more than 40 years. It is in a traditional hacienda-style farmhouse with dark wood beams, tiled floors, and lots of colonial grandeur, with jaw-dropping views of multiple mountain ranges. It is furnished in Incan artifacts, worn-in leather, and vibrant textiles. The atmosphere of the rooms, the lounge, and the restaurant was relentlessly romantic. After checking in, we wrapped ourselves in blankets near the fire, with obligatory pisco sours, watched the sun move, and, for the first time since we had arrived in the Sacred Valley, did nothing.

The hotel calls its dining concept “earth to table.” Most of the vegetables on your plate are



grown on a 10-acre organic farm that runs across the bottom of the property. Matt and I toured it one evening, recognizing various herbs, walking fields of different potatoes, which the farmers identify by their flowers. The farm is a reminder of why the valley has been called sacred for so long. Our guide told us that the fertility of this land was considered Pachamama's greatest gift. The beans, corn, potatoes, quinoa, and amaranth that grow so well are what enabled the Incas to build their empire. There are 50 kinds of corn and nearly 4,000 kinds of potatoes indigenous to Peru. The struggle today is to protect that natural biodiversity.

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Beet gnocchi with Brazil-nut sauce and *jamón serrano* at the Inkaterra Hacienda Urubamba, a dish made from produce grown on the property's organic farm. [Nick Ballon](#)

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We feasted in a candlelit hall, the lights of the valley glowing through the floor-to-ceiling windows. The restaurant excelled at traditional dishes done expertly, like *lomo saltado* and *pastel de choclo*, a surprisingly light corn pie, layered with guinea-pig ragù. The *ají de gallina*, a creamy, spicy dish of rice, chicken, and cheese, was so satisfying I had it twice.

The next day, two genial guides took us to a Quechuan weaving cooperative in Chincero (elevation 12,375 feet), which is known as the Rainbow City because the Incas believed it to be the birthplace of the rainbow. The guides pointed out adobe houses topped with ceramic bulls that were supposed to protect the inhabitants. Red plastic flags hanging in doorways signaled that chicha—a fermented alcoholic beverage made from corn— was available that day. The women of the collective showed us their natural ingredients, from soap made of grated yucca for washing alpaca wool to dyes made from herbs, berries, even bugs. A young weaver smashed a cochineal insect, a parasite that lives on cacti, into her palm to produce a bright red pigment, then spread it on her lips. “Inca lipstick,” she said, giggling.

We hiked down from Chincero on one of the original sections of the Inca Trail, built in the 15th century, following ravines and small streams that feed into the Urubamba. It was our same swath of the valley, but we were seeing it from a new angle—and at this point, it did feel like it belonged to us. We had been there less than a week, but I knew that glacier under Sawasiray from multiple vantage points, and I knew when we hit a dirt road that we were almost to Urquillos and the gigantic *pisonay* tree. The Incas called these violet and jade mountains mystical because the gods remain in the earth, and no matter how modern voices might intrude, theirs are the cadences the Quechua still listen to, the ones that call the rest of us to explore.

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# The Details: What to Do in Sacred Valley, Peru

## Getting There

Visitors typically fly in to Cuzco by way of Lima. The valley's southern edge is only eight miles from Cuzco, but many of its destinations, like Pisac and Urubamba, require a 30-minute to two-hour drive. Most Sacred Valley hotels arrange airport transfers, but you can also get there by rental car, taxi, or train.

## Tour Operations

**andBeyond** The experiential [travel specialist](#) offers two seven-day Peruvian itineraries with in-depth visits to the Sacred Valley: a Peru Family Adventure, focusing on outdoor activities for the entire clan, and the Flavors of Peru, designed for epicurean travelers. The company can also create bespoke itineraries to cater to travelers' specific interests.

*Itineraries from \$4,850.*

**Mountain Lodges of Peru** This [outfitter's new Lares Adventure](#) is a customizable five- or seven-day itinerary along the Sacred Valley's Lares Trek, concluding at Machu Picchu. The journey includes hikes to Incan sites, visits to remote Andean communities, and more, with each night spent at a different luxury lodge along the way. *Itineraries from \$2,400.*

## Hotels

**Belmond Hotel Rio Sagrado** Set along the banks of the Urubamba River, [this property](#) consists of 11 suites, 10 rooms, and two villas nestled in verdant, terraced gardens. In addition to horseback riding, rafting, and guided tours of archaeological sites, visitors can also experience the region aboard the company's luxury train, Belmond Hiram Bingham (\$560 per person for a round-trip). *Doubles from \$365.*

**Explora Valle Sagrado** Located on a working corn plantation, [this resort](#) is designed to maximize the quiet and grandeur of the surrounding landscape. Guests can choose from among 26 different excursions to various Sacred Valley destinations. *Doubles from \$1,950 per person for three nights, all-inclusive.*

**Inkaterra Hacienda Urubamba** The [newest hotel](#) from one of Peru's most venerable nature travel specialists. It consists of 12 rooms in the Casa Hacienda and 24 stand-alone luxury casitas on 100 acres surrounded by mountains. On the 10-acre organic plantation, guests can pick their own produce to be used in their meals. *Doubles from \$462.*

**Inkaterra La Casona** Whether on your way to or from the Sacred Valley, you will want to [spend a night or two](#) in the imperial city of Cuzco, the historic capital of the Inca empire. This boutique hotel, in a lovingly restored 16th-century manor house on the Plazoleta Nazarenas, offers the finest accommodations in town. *Doubles from \$418.*

## Sights & Activities

The Sacred Valley is filled with important cultural sites. Ask your hotel or outfitter to assist you with visits to each.

**Moray** An Incan site consisting of elaborate terraces in concentric circles. The structure is believed to have been formed to grow crops like coca and tobacco.

**Ollantaytambo** Overlooking its namesake village, this fortress and temple ruin marks the site where Manco Inca, the Incan prince, repelled an attack by the Spanish conquistador Hernando Pizarro.

**Pisac** The ancient Incan ruins here overlook the Urubamba River and house one of the rare *intihuatanas*, ritual stones used for astronomical observation. Salt Pans of Maras Thought to have been created by the Incas sometime in the 1400s, these salt pools are still in use today.