

The Best of South America: Mountain Lodges of Peru's Lares Adventure



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FULL BIO

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“Dear Ann Abel,” my welcome letter began, “You will soar with the condors.”

That’s a bold pronouncement—and a reference to sacred Incan cosmology, in which condors ruled the heavens—but one that turned out to feel justified. For one thing, [Mountain Lodges of Peru](#) was about to keep my compatriots and me above 10,000 feet for the better part of a week. For another, the luxury-adventure outfitter’s guides were going to show us jaw-dropping vistas and introduce us to traditional cultures (not to mention house us in luxurious alpine lodges with soaring great rooms and private hot tubs on the terraces) that would offer glimpses of a connection with the divine. ‘



Staff at Mountain Lodge's of Peru's Huacahuasi Lodge

Along with the condor soaring, the letter promised walking in the ancient footsteps of the Incas and crossing paths with indigenous Andean people, as well as “space for solitude,” “a chance to renew your spirit” and times to “test your limits with invigorating hikes”—and recover with hot showers and hearty meals. (I did this trip as a guest of MLP.)

The company started ten years ago, offering luxurious but strenuous hikes along the Salkantay Trek, which was just then emerging as a less-crowded alternative to the Inca Trail. (Although my MLP guide told me there is no one Inca Trail but rather a system of hundreds of them.) The program was the brainchild of a Peruvian family, who partnered with another local and an Austrian mountaineer. Rather than the camping trips that other adventure operators offer, MLP’s would house guests each night in a beautifully turned-out remote lodge that’s warm and comfortable.

It was a big success—and still the only lodge-to-lodge route to [Machu Picchu](#)—but three years ago, the company decided to expand. Aiming to cater to guests who don’t necessarily want to hike three to seven hours a day at elevation for six days, the new Lares Adventure would include a challenging trek each day for those who want them and a cultural excursion (village visits, meeting weavers at their collective, sacred site tours) in the Sacred Valley and the highlands above it every day for those who want to take it easier (and those who have a logical aversion to rain). All guests have a local guide who has basic EMT certification or more. (Way above the legal requirements for Peru.)

Their goal, says co-founder Enrique Umbert, is partly to explore the remote reaches of the region and mostly to preserve them. The highlands don’t get many tourists and, as a result, are one of the few places in Peru where people wear native dress as everyday clothes (not work uniforms) and stalls in the market serve roasted *cuy* (guinea pig) as a snack.

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A view over the Sacred Valley (photo by Ann Abel)

I'd wanted to go for the serious trekking, but an injury steered me toward the cultural activities. My gain. In a somewhat improvised itinerary—the guides pivot to maximize weather conditions and local connections—I walked slowly to a high overlook above Incan ruins, trailed a couple of adorable young girls who became impromptu volunteer “guides” and found myself welcomed into a small-town weaving collective with flowers festooned around the entrance and the weavers in their finest finery as they showed off their work. I happily ambled downhill beside a susurrant river and picturesque villages. Condors were often overhead.

The hotels were delights, starting in Cusco—a necessary stop to acclimatize before a trek. MLP's [Mercado](#) hotel, just a few blocks from the main square, Plaza de Armas, has live music in the courtyard every night and many comfortable spaces in which to relax with a pisco sour. (They've since opened a second hotel in Cusco.)



The great room of the Huacahuasi Lodge (photo by Ann Abel)

Along the way, we spent one night at MLP's private Lamay Lodge, which has llamas grazing in the backyard, and its majestic Huacahuasi Lodge, some 12,000 feet above sea level, with a gorgeous, soaring lobby and Jacuzzis on all the rooms' balconies. At both, the largely local staff (who often fell behind a language barrier but were sweet enough to compensate) served us delicious, simply prepared but beautifully presented Peruvian food.

Toward the end of the five-day trip, we settled into hotels that are open to the public. In Urubamba, the main tourist town in the Sacred Valley, Kuychi Rumi was the most soulful home base one could hope for, with wildflower-strewn pathways between the two-bedroom villas and homemade oven-cooked meals, including a festive pizza night. And on the last night, MLP wisely books guests into Aguas Calientes, the town at the base of Machu Picchu. And they use the best lodging there, the outstanding [Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel](#).

There are other, more efficient (or more arduous) ways to reach [Machu Picchu](#). But this one came pretty close to the condors.