

# Change Your World Through Travel: An Insider's View On The Importance Of Sustainable Tourism



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Chasing the dream: I write about travel and the world around me [FULL BIO](#) ✓

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Eco Tourism: I talk to Jose Koechlin, founder of Inkaterra, about its latest project and the future of travel

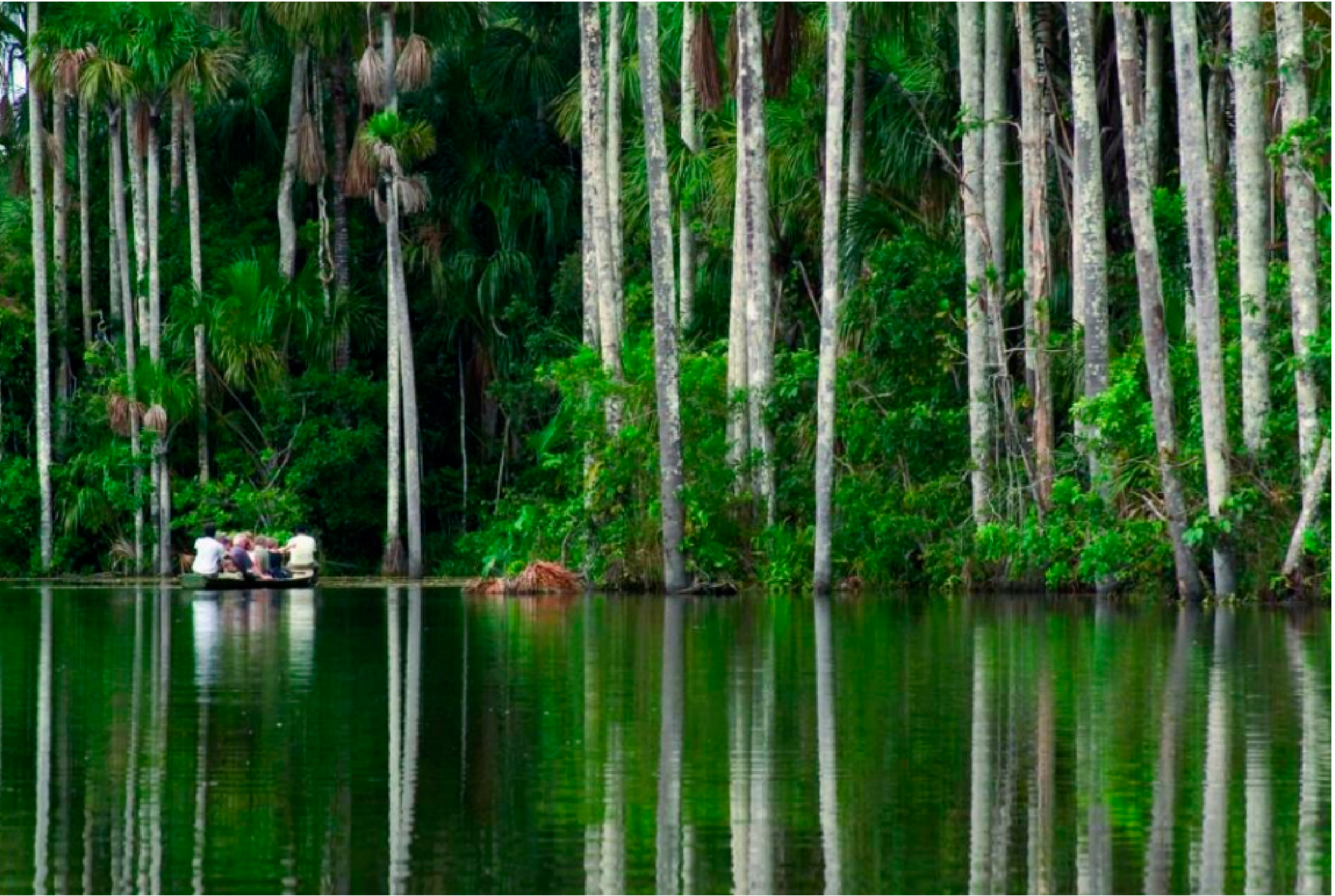
Back in the 1970s, **Inkaterra** was one of the first travel companies to pioneer eco tourism. Its award-winning collection of properties throughout **Peru** have become known as the leading standard in how to work collaboratively with local communities, how to incorporate environmentally friendly design and how to use natural materials. Having just celebrated its 40th anniversary, the Peruvian company will soon throw open its doors of its latest project - the Amazonian **Inkaterra Guides Field Station**, due to open in June.



The new Inkaterra Guide Field Station (Credit: Inkaterra)

With 2017 proclaimed the **International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development** by the United Nations, the opening is perfectly timed. Located in the Tambopata National Reserve, it will offer travellers the opportunity to explore the rainforest and participate in various conservation projects, overseen by Inkaterra’s NGO, the *Inkaterra Asociación* (ITA).

Originally designed as a research location for ITA and a location to train Inkaterra’s Explorer Guides, the Field Station will now welcome eco-conscious travellers, families, researchers, volunteers and students from around the world.



Inkaterra Reserva Amazonica Lago Sandoval (Credit: Inkaterra)



Here, I speak to **Jose Koechlin**, the founder of **Inkaterra**, about its work to date and what lies ahead for the company and tourism as a whole.



Jose Koechlin  
(Credit: Inkaterra)

**Inkaterra celebrates 40 years in sustainable tourism, what are the main differences between the tourism industry today and 40 years ago?**

In 1975, three years after coproducing Werner Herzog’s film *Aguirre, The Wrath of God* to promote tourism in Peru through cinema, Inkaterra established its first lodge in the Amazon rainforest of **Madre de Dios**. Its design was inspired by the local Ese’Eja culture and built with



native materials, in harmony with the environment. The new lodge ended up being Peru's first ecological reserve, designed for tourism purposes. Until then, "ecotourism" was unheard of and it was a concept that we have pioneered and worked hard to promote. Since then, Inkaterra has been using a holistic approach with the goal of generating added value in remote areas of Peru: scientific research is produced as a basis for biodiversity conservation, education and the wellbeing of local communities. These concepts were not common practice then and still aren't that common, even today.

Now, 40 years on, the United Nations has declared 2017 the International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development. Nowadays there is a greater awareness on the value of biodiversity, as well as on the conservation of local cultures and the responsible use of natural resources via ecotourism.



*Machu Picchu in Peru is one of the country's must-sees*

### **How important is it for the travel industry and tourists in general to be sustainable, eco-aware and locally minded?**

Very important. Not only that, but our experience at Inkaterra has confirmed that sustainable tourism is a profitable market trend, benefitting both wildlife and local communities. Inkaterra hotels appeal to experiential travellers, adventure travellers, academic tourism, luxury and family travel markets, as well as the more niche markets such as birding, orchid observation and gastronomy. Our offering is based on authentic eco-luxury, surrounded by nature. Inkaterra hotels are inspired by local cultures and are built using indigenous materials, in harmony with the environment. Good business practices have allowed us to cater to over 200,000 travellers in 2016, and we are currently members of Virtuoso, Relais & Châteaux and National Geographic Lodges. It is a business model that allows both hoteliers and guests to contribute to biodiversity conservation as well as the wellbeing of local communities.



## Would it be better for us to travel less to help protect the planet?

Travelling when done in a sustainable way, is a way of economically assisting local cultures to continue their ancestral ways of living. When I was 10 years old, I was able to travel across Peru for the first time, on a school trip organized by Jesuit priests. Since then, I have been aware of the country's natural and cultural diversity and my childish amazement has remained with me to date. After co-producing Werner Herzog's *Aguirre, the Wrath of God* and *Fitzcarraldo*, I wanted to keep working in the Amazon rainforest. The way to achieve my goal was to invest in a field that would not alter nature. Ecotourism was the right path to do so. Sustainable travel is not only a source of inspiration – it is the most effective way to raise awareness of our planet's conservation. Only when travelling do we get to know local cultures and natural environments. We learn about their uniqueness as well as their fragility, and then we are contributing to their preservation for future generations to come.



*The Amazon: Inkaterra's heart*  
(Credit: Inkaterra)

## As an award-winning pioneer of eco-tourism, what are the top three things that tourists can do to be more eco-conscious travellers?

1. Eco-conscious travellers looking for a knowledgeable experience should **investigate the facts** relating to a destination, especially if they are interested in nature and culture. Peru for example has a whole host of amazing facts that, when unveiled by travellers, open up the possibility of a much better itinerary and, ultimately, experience. For instance, Peru's geography hosts 2,200 kilometers of Pacific coastline, a significant part of the Andes mountain range – where the Qhapaq Ñan, or Great Inca Trail, was established as a transporting system longer than Rome's Appian Way - and the Amazon rainforest covers 62% of the country's area. This setting has been a merger of various Pre-Hispanic civilizations, from the blooming of Caral 5,500 years ago, a cradle of civilization contemporary to Mesopotamia, to the splendor of the Inca Empire in early 15<sup>th</sup> century. Peru is also one of the 17 mega-diverse countries in the world, with 84 of the 104 life zones in the Holdridge scheme. It is the third country with the largest number of bird species in the world with 1816 bird species and 120 endemics.
2. **Respect** for local cultures and environments is crucial. Avoid activities that may impact wildlife in a negative way, and embrace eco-friendly practices, such as reducing the use of plastic and low carbon emissions.



3. **Financial support** of research and conservation projects, small donations (\$5 per month via credit-card recurring billings) can truly make a difference.

### What are the top 10 things hotels can do?

1. **Perform inventories.** Know your stock! As many companies undertake stock control every year, eco-lodges have the opportunity to create flora and fauna inventories, assisting in the study of education of biodiversity.
2. **Contribute to local communities.** Promoting jobs in ecotourism is the best way to reduce migration and safeguard local cultures. Over the course of 40 years, more than 4,000 people from local communities have been trained by Inkaterra, offering career opportunities in hospitality, field guidance (birdwatching, wildlife interpretation), sustainable fishing and agroforestry production to produce local goods such as cacao and Brazil nut.



Inkaterra La Casona  
(Credit: Inkaterra)

3. **Work a sustainable supply chain.** It delivers a long-term profitability and is environmentally conscious. Inkaterra Hacienda Urubamba, our most recently opened property in the Cusco region, promotes the *Earth to Table* concept in a 10-acre organic farm that encourages guests to pick their own produce. A harvest field consisting of carbon-free crops such as quinoa, the Urubamba giant corn, medicinal herbs and a variety of potatoes, is farmed with traditional hand tools and oxen, educating guests about Peru’s ancestral harvesting techniques. Local goods are supplied to the other properties in the region, Inkaterra La Casona (Cusco) and Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel.



Amazonian birds are a main attraction to Inkaterra guests  
(Credit: Inkaterra)



4. **Explore eco-friendly niche markets.** One of Inkaterra’s main activities is bird watching. It is one of the most popular and profitable ecotourism activities and creates prime opportunities for biodiversity conservation and the encouragement of jobs in eco-tourism. Inkaterra aims to prompt the establishment of additional local reserves to protect the environment of Peru’s endemic birds as well as safeguarding the routes for migratory birds across the Pacific.



Inkaterra Canopy Walkway  
(Credit: Inkaterra)

5. **Commitment to conservation projects.** Inkaterra’s à-la-carte excursions in areas of influence are inspired by our conservation projects. These include the Inkaterra Canopy Walkway, a hanging bridge system at 100ft above the ground designed to study wildlife in the rainforest canopy; and the Spectacled Bear Rescue Center at Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel, which benefits the only bear species native to South America. It is a successful way to produce scientific research and conservation, funded by ecotourism.
6. **Learning experiences.** Offering onsite excursions led by local guides who are trained with scientific and historic facts is an effective way of engaging travellers in knowledgeable, enriching experiences whilst supporting local biodiversity and culture.



Inkaterra's Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel (Credit: Inkaterra)



7. **Go neutral.** Conserving green areas and reducing carbon footprint are beneficial to the environment. As the first Peruvian enterprise to be declared carbon neutral (1989), Inkaterra mitigates the effects of deforestation in the Amazon rainforest whilst assisting in carbon sequestration through the preservation of Peru's first ecological concession, with more than 10,000Ha of virgin rainforest. As determined by Professor Tim Baker (University of Leeds), one hectare conserved at Inkaterra Reserva Amazónica or Inkaterra Hacienda Concepción captures 200 tons of carbon.
8. **Efficient design.** The design of each Inkaterra hotel is inspired by local cultures and built with native materials in harmony with the environment, proving each property with its own personality. Hotel designs can also be efficient in contributing towards saving energy – from large windows to take advantage of sunlight, to low-flow water devices.



The dining room at Inkaterra Reserve Amazonica  
(Credit: Inkaterra)

9. **Embrace green practices.** Reducing the use of plastic, using renewable energy, recycling water and waste - every little counts when committing to green operations.
10. **Produce media content.** Engaging content is a great way to promote a brand. From books and videos to educational tools and Latin Grammy-nominated albums of Peruvian music, Inkaterra has continuously proliferated the cultural and natural values of the destinations where its hotels are established. Last December, a birdcam was installed at Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel to livestream on All About Birds – the Cornell Lab of Ornithology's webpage – a nest with two Green-and-white hummingbirds (*Amazilia viridicauda*), endemic to Peru. From the chicks hatching to their fledging, there was 150k views from 170 countries and 3.4 million minutes watched – about six years! See it here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sNqHAX9NWBI&t=7s>

### What is the primary aim of the new Inkaterra Guides Field Station?

Inkaterra Guides Field Station is a key project in which we aim to offer an educational experience for scientists, students, volunteers and eco-conscious travelers who want to explore the rainforest and participate in diverse research and conservation projects overseen by our NGO, *Inkaterra Asociación* (ITA). With four cabanas and two large pavilions, the Inkaterra Guides Field Station houses an Eco-center and a lab to perform studies on flora and fauna.





*Inkaterra Guides Field Station will offer inspiring excursions  
(Credit: Inkaterra)*

Based in the Amazon rainforest of Madre de Dios, it will also serve as a training ground for Inkaterra Explorer Guides, who offer local knowledge in the excursions they lead. The Inkaterra Canopy Walkway takes visitors along a series of seven hanging bridges, 11,29ft (344m) above the jungle floor, offering a unique opportunity to view the wildlife diversity in the rainforest canopy. Keen birdwatchers can take a boat trip to River Island, a large sandbank on the shores of the Madre de Dios River, to explore the floodplains that play home to many sought after bird species, including the Amazonian Umbrellabird (*Cephalopterus ornatus*).



*Inkaterra Reserva Amazonica  
(Credit: Inkaterra)*

**What do you hope for with the travel industry in future?**




I hope that a significant part of the travel industry will embrace sustainable operations. Should this take place, ecotourism might become a leading business model on a world scale, thereby generating more income and a better quality of life for local populations than many extractive industries today.

**What’s next for Inkaterra?**

*Inkaterra Asociación* has proposed the creation of a 78,756ha sustainable landscape corridor off the Tambopata National Reserve, from Puerto Maldonado (on both banks of the Madre de Dios River) to the Peru-Bolivia border, to mitigate the effects of illegal mining and logging via a replicable ecotourism model. The corridor project was presented in a recent trip to Madre de Dios supported by USAID and the United States Embassy in Peru. Dr. Thomas Lovejoy, U.S. Science Envoy for the State Department (“the Godfather of Biodiversity”), and Dr. Francisco Dallmeier, Director of the Smithsonian Center for Conservation and Sustainability, assessed loss of natural resources in the Amazon rainforest and its long-term impact on a world scale.



*The main house at Inkaterra Reserva Amazonica*  
(Credit: Inkaterra)

We are also currently working in Cabo Blanco, a legendary fishing cove in Northern Peru. In 1953, the all-tackle world record – a 1560lb black marlin, filmed by Warner Bros for its adaptation of *The Old Man and the Sea* – was landed here by Alfred Glassell, Jr. Four years later, the largest tuna ever caught (435lb) was also here, and Eco Tourism: I talk to Jose Koechlin, founder of Inkaterra, about its latest project and the future of travel  confirmed its international status as a sport fishing mecca. Marilyn Monroe, John Wayne and other celebrities visited Cabo Blanco, including Nobel Prize laureate Ernest Hemingway. He went in search of the largest standing marlins onboard the *Miss Texas*, Glassell’s iconic fishing boat, which was recently restored by Inkaterra. Miss Texas has been captained since 2013 by former ESPN host Norm Isaacs, revered by GAFF Magazine as “a time-tested star, like Dylan or Jagger.”

Six decades on, Inkaterra has presented to the Ministry of Environment a technical proposal for the creation of Peru’s first marine reserve in the tropical sea of Cabo Blanco, where 70% of the country’s ichthyologic diversity is found. Through the encouragement of sustainable fishing techniques in local communities and the development of ecotourism activities, Inkaterra is contributing to the recovery of Cabo Blanco’s bountiful ocean and its cultural heritage.

*Inkaterra properties are found in the heart of the Machu Picchu cloud forest (**Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel** and **El MaPi, by Inkaterra**), deep in the Amazonian rainforest of Madre de Dios (**Inkaterra Reserva Amazónica**, **Inkaterra Hacienda Concepción**, and the new **Inkaterra Guides Field Station**), nestled in the cobbled streets of Cusco (**Inkaterra La Casona**) and in the Sacred Valley of the Incas (**Inkaterra Hacienda Urubamba**).*

[Inkaterra.com](http://Inkaterra.com)

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